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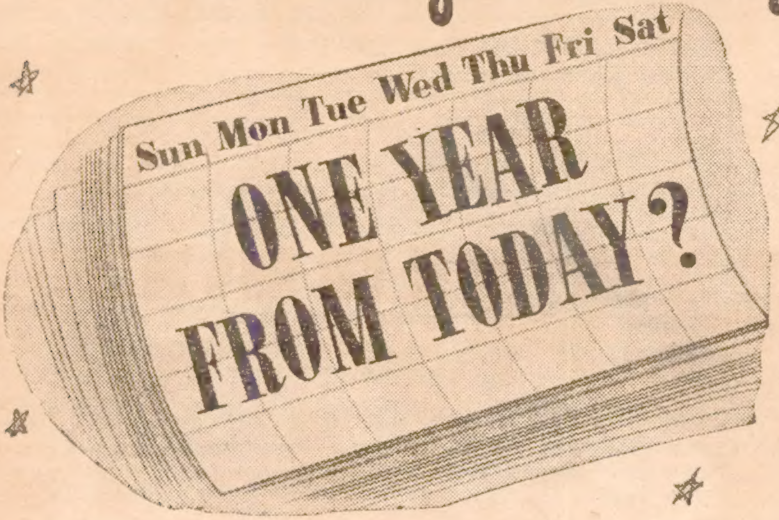

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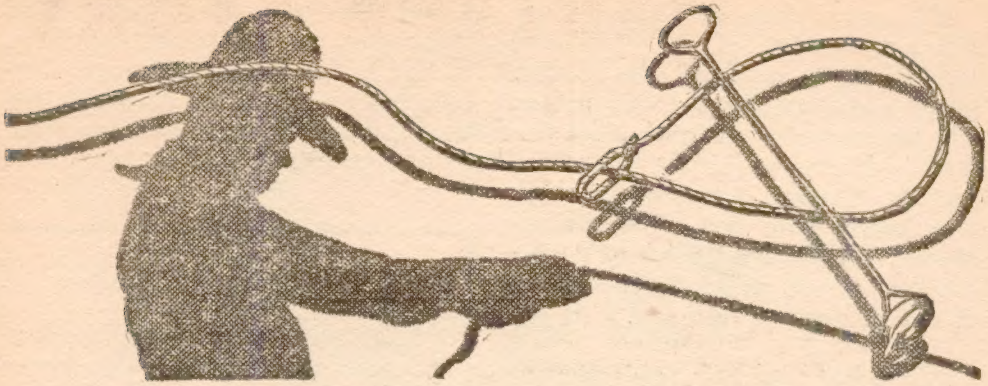

The Roundup

Once again the holiday season is here and we want to start off this weekly meeting by extending our sincere wishes for a Bright and Happy Christmas to you all. And here's hoping, too, that the New Year will bring you many blessings and prosperity, and that 1941 will see peace and good will throughout the world.

Edd McCarty, one of our readers from Farmington, New Mexico, has written us a letter which we know all you horse lovers will deeply appreciate. Mr. McCarty's letter is a fine tribute to that animal which has been so noble a friend to man. Mr. McCarty writes:

"I read in your Roundup, the October 5th issue, that you dedicated it to the Cuarto Centennial of Coronado's great trek through the Southwest.

"New Mexico stressed this Cuarto Centennial by putting the words on her license tags; and the people of the State celebrated it with fiestas and entradas, and tried to honor the men who brought the horse to the Southwest.

"We of New Mexico feel that we owe our very existence to the horse, so we honor the men who brought them to the country. Coronado brought the first horse up from Mexico. (Horses had been brought to that country from Spain by Cortez.) History tells us that thirteen escaped from Coronado's band—four mares and nine horses—the 'Adams and Eves' of the great bands of mustangs that used to roam the uplands of the Southwest. So we celebrate the coming of that never-failing, never-faltering animal. Side by side, man and horse have fought and died to conquer the wilderness for over four hundred years—1540 to 1940.

"So please dedicate an issue to THE HORSE, for all he has done for the West."

We were right glad to hear from Mr. McCarty, and we think he has made an excellent suggestion. Wonder how some of you other members feel about an issue along these lines? Why not write in and give us your ideas as to how we could make an issue of this sort something in which you, the readers, can take part, too? We'll be looking forward to your letters, folks, so write us pronto.

The many fans of George Cory Franklin, author of the well-loved animal stories of Chief, the wonder pony, and Pete, the old trail leader, will be interested to know that Columbia Pictures recently released a picture, PRAIRIE SCHOONERS, which was taken from one of Franklin's stories. Although we haven't seen the film as yet, we're sure aiming to at our earliest opportunity.

"I've just finished reading your October 26th issue," writes Albert Olson of Elmira, New York, "and want you to know that through it you retrieved a customer who was beginning to wander. The reason I bought it is you put Jim Kjelgaard's name on the cover, and I had quit looking through the contents page, for it seemed so long since you had run one of his stories. He sure knows his outdoors."

We certainly hope, Albert, that your return to the fold will be permanent. And, incidentally, we've just bought several new stories by Jim Kjelgaard which rank among the best he's written yet!

"Many years ago," writes G. Pierson, of San Bernardino, California, "my grandfather back in Illinois, bought a dark bay mare from some men who said they were from Montana. They had about forty head and were selling them wherever they could. This mare was branded low down on the front shoulder, and the brand was J C or C J. The brand ran together—the J being over the C—and was about eight inches long. I've often wondered if it was possible to learn the whereabouts of this ranch."

Any of you old-timers know this brand? We'd be mighty glad to hear from you if you do, so that we could pass on the information to friend Pierson. Mr. Pierson had some other mighty interesting things to say in his letter, but space forbids telling you about them at this time. But we'll make sure he's with us soon again.

In Western Story next week—

"No man ever died deader around San Angelo than Jim Tennant," declared old Buckshot Bledsoe—but that was before he met up with a scar-faced young caballero whose back trail led from boothill to border badlands. Can you solve the mystery of this DEAD MAN DEPUTY? Read T. T. Flynn's smashing new novel of renegade intrigue, and test your skill as a range detective.

Sammy Dane's fall from the deck of the *Ladybird* plunged him right into the turbulent, gun-swept perils that rode the Big Muddy. What part was he to play in the plans of a ruthless tinhorn who plotted destruction for an ill-fated packet? In DOOMED CARGO, Norman A. Fox writes the thrilling story of a river waif who discovered the secret of courage.

It's always a pleasure to welcome back old friends—especially when their names are Willie and Big. These two roving buckaroos are back at their old tricks again in a gripping, suspense-filled story by E. C. Lincoln—TRACK TREACHERY.

Also on the tally book for this big issue are other adventure-packed stories of the West by Bennett Foster, John Colohan, B. Bristow Green and many other favorites. And you'll find a full list of departments and features.

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Rusty Shotridge sped toward San Ysidro with news that would blow that trail town apart—Tom Flanders and Bud Sigloe, incomparable trail bosses, were headed for a gunsmoke showdown!

TRAIL of the Thundering Herds

PART ONE

BY BENNETT FOSTER

CHAPTER I

THE PEACEMAKER

Rusty Shotridge could not avoid falling in with the stranger. The two roads came together and just at their juncture a tall man sat a big bay horse. Rusty, coming from the south, leading his bed horse, saw the man waiting and, as he came up, said:

"Evenin'."

The stranger returned the greeting, thin lips smiling tightly beneath his gray mustache. Rusty halted his horses, and the two men surveyed each other. The stranger's blue coat was rolled behind his saddle and he wore blue trousers and a white shirt that was neatly adorned with a small black bow tie. So much bespoke the townsman. On his feet were tight shop-made boots and on his head a Stetson. These said "Cattle." About his middle was a wide belt, innocent of cartridges, but supporting a heavy gun in a holster, and his saddle and gear showed well-cared-for use. Amazed at the contradiction of clothing, Rusty studied the

stranger's face. It was pleasant, firm-jawed, clean-shaven, tanned, and with sun wrinkles at the corners of the eyes. To Rusty it seemed that the face threw in with the hat and boots. Cattle had the edge over townsman. Rusty grinned.

"You headed for San Ysidro?" the stranger asked, his own inspection finished.

"Headin' that way," Rusty agreed, and then, because he was young and had not talked with anyone for a day, he amplified. "I'm goin' to catch on with the Watrous trail outfit."

The stranger nodded slightly, his smile broadening beneath the mustache. "Your first trip north, I take it," he said. "You seem mighty sure that Watrous will take you."

"Watrous was our neighbor—" Rusty began, and then, refuting any implied criticism that the stranger's words might have carried, "Everybody's got to make a first trip sometime, ain't they?"

"Sure," the tall man agreed placidly.

"You been up the trail?" Rusty ventured after a small pause.

"I have," the stranger agreed. "I—" He broke off and stared at Rusty questioningly. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, he spoke again. "Would you take word into San Ysidro for me?"

"It isn't much farther, is it?" Rusty asked. "I thought I'd get in—"

The stranger's gesture was impatient. "You'll get in," he interrupted. "The thing is, I ain't goin' to San Ysidro—yet. I want to send word in. Will you take it for me?"

"Sure."

The tall man considered briefly, forming his message in his mind. "You find Bud Sigloe," he directed, "and tell him that I'll be there."

Rusty nodded, his eyes brightening. Bud Sigloe was known up and down the land. Trail boss, fighting man, Sigloe's stature was on a par with that of Blocker, Flanders, Pierce and those other giants of the Kansas trail.

"I'll tell him," Rusty assured the stranger. "Who'll I say sent the word?"

"Tom Flanders," the man drawled. "Just tell him I'll be there."

Rusty stared at his companion with renewed interest. Tom Flanders! This was Tom Flanders talking to him! Tom Flanders was an immortal, a legend; one of those who topped the Olympus of public fame. Flanders had been with Billy Dixon at the Adobe Walls fight; he had been a sergeant of rangers, had served as night marshal of Abilene when that Kansas town was the lusty throat through which the first of the Texas cattle flowed to fill the belly of the North. Wherever men went in the vast reaches of the frontier, wherever peace and law needs had to be enforced, there surely Tom Flanders appeared.

"Yeah," said Rusty, and touched his horse with the rowels of his spurs. "I'll tell him." The horses—saddle horse and pack animal—moved ahead. A hundred yards Rusty rode, then looked back. Tom Flanders still sat there at the forks of the road, tall and straight upon his bay.

THE road wound down from the higher country toward the bottom land of the Puerco. Debouching from the mesquite, after a mile of riding, Rusty passed an adobe building. Another house was passed, and then another, until, rounding the corner of a particularly long and squat building, Rusty Shotridge found himself in town. San Ysidro

sprawled before him, the Puerco a dirty thread of water at its western limit, dust and buildings spreading toward the river.

Horses dozed at hitch rails and in front of the post office a little knot of men stopped their talk to survey Rusty as he passed. There were stores and warehouses, a blacksmith shop, a courthouse, saloons; and on one corner a church, white painted, sturdily occupied its place and made no compromise with its surroundings. Beyond the church, across the street from it, was the livery barn. In the dim recess of its alleyway, Rusty dismounted.

The lanky hostler, chewing a straw, informed Rusty languidly that the stalls were filled, but that he could put his horses in the corral, and his bed and saddle in the grain room. The charges, the hostler said, would be four bits a head, one dollar in their entirety. Rusty pulled off bed and saddle, and the hostler led the horses away. When he returned, Rusty had stowed away his belongings and was knocking dust from his trousers.

"Where," Rusty demanded, "will I find Bud Sigloe?"

The hostler's eyes widened. "What do you want Sigloe for?" he returned.

"I want to see him."

The straw in the hostler's mouth twitched as he chewed its end, and his eyes searched Rusty, surveying him from his small-rimmed, battered hat, on down past red-brown hair and tanned face, past powerfully sloping shoulders and slim waist girded with a heavy belt and weapon, past denim Levi's, to the toes of his brush-scarred boots. Then, lifting his gaze, the hostler met Rusty's gray-green eyes.

"You don't want to see Bud Sigloe," he said firmly.

"You're mistaken, friend. I do."

The hostler twitched his straw again. "Bud Sigloe's on the rampage," he announced. "He's raisin' Ned. He's took in the town. The marshal's scared of him. They sent to Dulcina for Tom Flanders to come over an' talk to Bud."

"So?" Rusty prompted.

"So," the hostler said with finality, "you don't want to see him unless yo're lookin' for trouble. Bud heard that they'd sent for Tom Flanders, an' he's down in the Bank Saloon now, waitin' for Flanders to come. He sent Flanders a message hisse'f. Told him when he come to come a-shootin'. Bud says that Tom Flanders nor nobody can curry him. Bud an' Tom was friends, too, but they ain't now. There's goin' to be a killin'. You stay away from Bud Sigloe, kid."

Rusty's eyes grew bleak at that last word. Young he was, but certainly he was no kid. "The Bank Saloon?" he drawled. "Thanks, friend." Wheeling abruptly, he left the wide-eyed hostler chewing on his straw.

The Bank Saloon was down the street beyond the church and opposite a store. There were no horses at the hitch rail in front of the saloon, nor were there men loitering under its awning. A little knot of men occupied the church corner, and farther down the street there were more men. Rusty noted these as his boots stirred up the dust of the street he crossed. The Bank Saloon had double doors, half shutters that swung easily. Rusty pushed the shutters aside.

INSIDE the saloon all was quiet. There were three men at the upper end of the bar, talking to the bartender. At the far end of the bar one man, squat, dark and un-

shaven, stood alone. He put down his whiskey glass and watched the door as Rusty entered. The bartender stepped away from his associates and these paused in their conversation. Rusty walked past them and stopped at the squat man.

"Mr. Sigloe?" he said.

Small brown bloodshot eyes

searched Rusty's face. "An' what of it?" the owner of the eyes snapped. Bud Sigloe was drunk and ugly, but not incapacitated. Looking at him, Rusty Shotridge could well believe the stories he had heard about this man. There was power in evidence, power in the body, power in the face. Drunk as he was, Bud Sigloe could still be reckoned as a whole man.

"Not much," Rusty answered quietly, "except I've got a message for you."

"What is it?"

"Tom Flanders said to tell you he'd be here."

Sigloe digested the words. "He'll be here, huh?" he snapped. "Are you a friend of Flanders?"

"Would you ask a better man to be a friend to?" Rusty answered. He was not at all afraid. Indeed, in Rusty Shotridge some of the same combativeness that possessed Sigloe, welled up and made itself felt. He liked Bud Sigloe; would, he knew, have given a good deal to have him as a friend; and yet, at the drop of a hat Rusty Shotridge would have gone to war with the trail boss. Sigloe, angry and drunk as he was, paused to consider the question Rusty had asked.

"No," he answered finally. "Tom Flanders is all right for a friend."

"Well, then," Rusty returned, "I brought his word to you." He wheeled, turning his back to Sigloe. The bartender was moving his head from side to side in little significant jerks. It was almost as though the barman spoke, saying: "Lay off. Lay off." Up at the end of the bar, close to the door, one of the three men shifted away from his fellows.

"It's right at six o'clock," the man stated meaningly.

Six o'clock, then, was the time that had been set. Bud Sigloe had stated that he would be waiting for Tom Flanders at six o'clock, and Tom Flanders had sent the word that he would be on hand. A challenge had been given, and Rusty Shotridge had brought the answer to that challenge. Wheeling from the bar, Rusty stepped across to the wall opposite and sat down upon a bench. Sigloe watched him, as did the bartender and the other three. Rusty's status was undetermined. If he was a friend of Tom Flanders he would bear watching. Relaxing on the bench, Rusty produced his tobacco and papers. His hands, forming the cigarette, were steady and adept. Finishing the smoke, Rusty lifted his eyes from his fingers and coolly met Sigloe's belligerent stare.

"I met Flanders at the forks of

the road," Rusty drawled. "I'd never seen him before, but I was glad to accommodate him."

Sigloe continued to stare; then with a grunt he turned back to his empty glass and the whiskey bottle. Rusty lighted his cigarette and addressed the bartender. "Is Colonel Watrous in town?"

The bartender said, "Uh—" and stopped suddenly. Under the push of a hand the shutters swung open and the doorway darkened as a man stepped through. At the bar end Sigloe set down his whiskey glass and squared around. The three men at the front of the bar stepped swiftly back toward the wall, and the bartender, hands spread flat on the bar top, poised himself. Tom Flanders was inside the Bank Saloon, standing to the right of the door.

"I got your word, Bud," Flanders stated flatly.

"I got yours," Sigloe said. "The kid brought it."

Tension, hard and stretched to the breaking point, hung all along the length of the bar. The quiet that followed the briefly spoken statements was ominous, yet in the quiet and the tension there was a reluctance. Temper and pride had brought these two together as enemies. Hot words, spoken in haste, had done this damage. Rusty Shotridge could feel the reluctance. He was on his feet, not realizing that he had risen, and now he moved forward to the bar. From the end of the bar one man threw out a short exclamation, and then the quiet held again. At the bar, between Bud Sigloe and Tom Flanders, Rusty Shotridge stopped.

"I've come a far piece today," he said quietly, looking at the bartender. "I'd like a glass of beer."

The man did not move. Rusty turned his head and, apparently, saw Tom Flanders for the first time. "Will you take a drink with me?" he asked Flanders.

"I—" Tom Flanders paused briefly, then moved forward. "Why, yes. I'll take a drink." The words were reluctant and hesitant. This interruption was a break in the set pattern Tom Flanders had formed in his mind. For the moment he could not cope with the broken pattern. From Flanders, Rusty turned and looked at Bud Sigloe. Sigloe's eyes were wary, and there was a question in them. For Bud Sigloe, too, the pattern had been broken.

"Would you take a drink, Mr. Sigloe?" Rusty drawled.

Sigloe did not move as Rusty spoke. He was crouched at the end of the bar, tense, ready.

"A drink, Mr. Sigloe?" Rusty said again.

Tom Flanders stopped a half step beyond Rusty. There was a moment of breathless waiting, and then Bud Sigloe's heavy shoulders relaxed. "Why," Sigloe said hesitantly. And then: "Yeah. I'll take a drink."

The bartender let his breath go in a gusty sigh. Rusty drawled, "Make mine beer," and turned casually so that his shoulders were against the bar. Sigloe was approaching warily, taking the short steps that would bring him to Rusty's other side. At the end of the bar the black-haired man who had spoken of the time, shifted and spoke again.

"False alarm. I thought they'd back down when the time come."

RUSTY could feel Sigloe tighten once more. Flanders stared across Rusty's body at Sigloe, his face becoming a bleak, expressionless mask. Rusty did not move. He

simply stared at the black-haired man, his gray eyes, more green than gray now, blank and agate hard.

"Friend," drawled Rusty Shotridge, "yore mouth is considerably bigger than yore brains." He continued to stare. The black-haired man could not meet those gray-green eyes. His own eyes lowering, he shifted nervously, looked at his companions for support and, finding none, wheeled and made toward the shutters. They closed behind him and Rusty, turning smoothly, faced the bar again. "Where's the beer?" he demanded.

Wakened to his duty, the bartender reached down for glasses. Sigloe's heavy shoulders had relaxed and from the corners of his eyes Rusty could see the beginning of a grin on the beard-stubbled face of the trail boss. Flanders rested his elbows on the bar, and was looking into the back-bar mirror. He, too, had relaxed.

"Kid," Bud Sigloe drawled, "yo're a damned fool. Make mine beer, Slim."

Flanders nodded his head gently, corroborating Sigloe's statement. "A damned fool," he murmured. "Right now I can like a damned fool. I'll take beer, too."

Slim, the bartender, set out three foaming glasses. Rusty, the hard bleakness erased from his face, reached out his hand for his glass. The barman was looking at him with awed eyes.

Flanders sipped his beer and made drawling comment. "San Ysidro is too big a town to hurrah, Bud. You got 'em treed. Don't you reckon it's time you let 'em come down?"

Sigloe turned the stem of his glass between broad, spatulate fingers. His voice was apologetic. "There wasn't nothin' to do, Tom."

"Uh-huh." Tom Flanders understood. The energy in Bud Sigloe had demanded an outlet, and there was nothing to do. An apology had been given and accepted. Flanders spoke again. "I been called to Dodge City. They want me to take over the marshal's job up there. I'd like to have a man along that I could trust, Bud."

Sigloe drank his beer, emptying half the glass at a gulp. "There's no man I'd sooner side, Tom," he said, "but I'm contracted to Ad Marble. I've promised to take a herd north for him." Sigloe paused and now the grin broke frankly all across his face. "How about takin' the kid here?" he asked. "I think he'd do."

Tom Flanders looked at Rusty. "How about it, kid?" he asked quietly.

Down deep in Rusty Shotridge pride welled up. These men did not even know his name, but to them he was an equal. To these two, actions were more than names or words.

"I'd like to go," Rusty said. "Thanks for the offer, Mr. Flanders. But I always wanted to go up the trail. I—"

"Yore man, Bud," Tom Flanders interrupted. He lifted his glass of beer again. "Here's how."

Rusty's glass was in his hand. Together the three drank.

The beer finished, Flanders and Sigloe moved from the bar. Rusty would have remained, but Sigloe's hand upon his arm urged him to accompany them. The Bank Saloon was busy now. Men were coming in, lining the bar, their curious glances following the three as they seated themselves. Word of what had happened had left the Bank and now the curious came to see for themselves.

Flanders squared his chair around and his eyes were bright with curi-

osity as he looked at Rusty Shotridge. What's your name, kid?" he asked. "Whereabouts are you from?"

"I'm Rusty Shotridge. We got a place down close to Arroyo Grande." Oddly, the appellation "kid" coming from Flanders did not anger Rusty. Sigloe put his hands on the table top and leaned back in his chair.

"Dan Shotridge's boy?" he asked.

"Yes."

Flanders nodded, and Sigloe's smile, ever close to the surface, began to form once more, the wrinkles appearing so slowly at the corners of his eyes that Rusty, watching, could almost hear them crackle.

"That accounts for it then," Sigloe stated. "I knew your daddy, Rusty."

"I've rode with Dan Shotridge," Flanders seconded. "How's the country down that way? Dry?"

RUSTY could sense that these men were using him. They made conversation with him so that they might gain ease with each other. He rose to the occasion.

"No. We've had some rain," he said. "The grass is pretty good."

Neither Flanders nor Sigloe, Rusty could see, was paying a great deal of attention to his words. They watched each other. Rusty went on talking, utilizing commonplaces, grass and season, water and cattle, for his subjects. He could feel his companions relax as he talked, could feel the tension, still present, drain out of them. Exhausting his topics, Rusty stopped. Both his companions were leaning back in their chairs and their faces had settled into placid lines.

"A good year then," Flanders said. "Are there many cattle comin' out of that country?"

"There's been some bought."

"How come," Sigloe drawled, "that you didn't tie on with a herd goin' north from there?"

Rusty looked at him. "Colonel Watrous used to be a neighbor of ours," he answered. "He promised me a job whenever I undertook to make the trip up the trail."

Both Sigloe and Flanders nodded understandingly. An awkward silence fell. He had served his purpose, Rusty knew. The two men were at ease now and wanted only their own company. Rusty got up slowly.

"I've not had supper," he said, "an' breakfast is a long time ago. If you gentlemen will eat with me?"

"I've got to hunt a barber shop an' clean up," Sigloe announced. "I'm dirty as a hawg. Tom, you an' Rusty—"

"I'll go with you, Bud," Tom Flanders interrupted, and smiled at Rusty. "Suppose we meet here after supper, Rusty? That suit you?"

All three had risen. Rusty grinned and nodded in answer to Flanders' question. "That suits me," he said.

"An' we'll celebrate," Sigloe announced.

They moved away from the table,

Flanders and Sigloe toward the door, Rusty following. He paused at the bar to let the other two go on alone. The shutters swung closed behind Sigloe's back, and the bartender, hurrying up, stopped and faced Rusty. There was admiration in the man's eyes.

"You sure done it!" he pronounced. "I never seen the beat of it."

Rusty disregarded the bartender's adulation. "Who," he drawled, "was the black-haired fellow that gave up so much head?"

"Slippery Smith," the bartender answered and busied his hands with bottle and glass. "Here. Have a drink. This one is on the house."

CHAPTER II

A CHALLENGE

THE lobby of the Stockman Hotel was not so grand a place as the lobby of the Delhi in Austin, but it was grand enough. Rusty Shotridge, pausing just inside, surveyed the lobby's brass chandeliers, its red plush and its deep-piled carpet, before advancing. Across from him, at the desk, cowmen were standing talking to the clerk, and some of the chairs and sofas were occupied.

Making his way toward the desk, Rusty passed by a chair, and hesitated. There was something familiar about the back of the red head that shoved over the chair top.

"Sorrel-top," Rusty murmured softly as he paused.

He had always been able to get a fight out of Ellen Watrous by using that name. This occasion was not an exception. The redhead turned swiftly and Rusty found himself looking into angry blue eyes. For an instant he was chagrined, believing that he had made a mistake; then his grin broadened as the blue eyes lost their anger.

"Rusty Shotridge!" Ellen Watrous exclaimed, and came up from the chair.

She was slight, not so tall as Rusty by a full head, but there was a wiry strength in her hands as she put them on Rusty's shoulders and shook him.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded. "Why didn't you let us know you were coming? Have you seen dad? When did you leave the ranch?" The questions were shot out, one following on the heels of the other. Rusty's grin was affectionate as he looked down at the girl and, lifting her hands from his shoulders, held them.

"Easy," he commanded. "There wasn't any use in writing when I was comin', was there? I haven't seen the colonel yet, but I'm lookin' for him. How are you, Ellen?"

Recollection suddenly flooded Rusty. This was the girl he had taught to ride. This was the little redhead that had followed him about the ranch, dogging his footsteps. Little red-headed nuisance.

"You haven't changed much, Ellen," he commented. "You still ask questions. You haven't grown up too much."

Ellen tugged at his hands. "Come here and sit down," she commanded. "Dad's in the bar with Leonard Carlisle. They've bought the LM steers. Come and sit down, Rusty."

Obediently Rusty allowed himself to be led to a seat. Beside the chair Ellen had occupied there was another, and across from the two chairs there was a sofa. Rounding the chairs, Rusty stopped short. A dark-haired girl occupied the second chair, her eyes showing her amusement as she looked up.

"Uh—" Rusty said. "I didn't know—that is—I didn't see—" His embarrassment was apparent, and the dark-haired girl smiled. Ellen, five and a half feet of impatience, made introduction.

"Marcia, this is Rusty Shotridge. I used to play with him when we had a ranch at Arroyo Grande. We

were neighbors. Rusty, this is Marcia Carlisle."

Rusty's hat came off and was clutched in both his broad hands. He cleared his throat again and was desperately conscious of the size of his hands and of his awkwardness. "Pleased to meet you," Rusty stammered. "I didn't know—"

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Shotridge?" Marcia Carlisle asked gently.

Rusty found himself seated on the sofa. Ellen was ensconced in her chair, asking questions, making demands on his attention, but Rusty could scarcely take his eyes from the dark-haired girl. He had never seen anyone like Marcia Carlisle before, had never seen anyone so beautiful. She smiled at him gently and, lost in her smile, Rusty made perfunctory answer to the queries Ellen flung at him.

The folks were all right, Rusty said. Things were just the same down along the Arroyo Grande. He hadn't seen Bess Walther. Walther had moved. No, he didn't know where. Yes, his mother was fine. They'd built a new house. The questions were endless and a little annoying. Rusty wanted to look at Marcia Carlisle, not answer Ellen's questions.

INTERRUPTION came when Rusty heard his name boomed. He got up. Colonel John Watrous, big, beginning to pack a stomach, his thick mane of hair just starting to show a little gray, was looming over him. Beside Watrous was a young man, dark, smooth, almost as big as Watrous himself. Rusty shook hands with the colonel and looked expectantly at the dark-haired man.

"Mr. Carlisle, Rusty," Watrous introduced. "Leonard, this is the son of my old friend, Dan Shotridge."

Rusty shook hands with the dark-haired young man. The colonel drew a chair over and sat down. Rusty occupied the end of the sofa once more. Carlisle took the other end.

"And what brings you up north, Rusty?" Watrous demanded.

Rusty twisted his hat, turning it around and around in his fingers. "You told me to come an' see you," he answered, "whenever I wanted to go up the trail."

The colonel's laugh boomed. "Got the fever, have you?" he demanded. "Want to go up the trail. Well, you've come to the right party, hasn't he, Leonard?"

Carlisle was watching Rusty intently, his dark eyes not friendly, but searching. He nodded slightly.

"Leonard and I have bought the LM steers," the colonel continued. "We're driving them north. You're just in time, Rusty."

Rusty looked from Watrous to Carlisle and back again. Colonel Watrous had never before had a partner. He had always operated alone. The colonel answered Rusty's unspoken question.

"Carlisle wants to be a drover," he said. "I needed a pardner." His hands finished the explanation with a little gesture. Rusty nodded.

"How are things down South?" Watrous asked. "How did you leave Dan and your mother?"

"They're fine," Rusty said. "Dan had a horse fall with him last winter, but he's all right now. Are you going to have a place for me, colonel?"

"For Dan Shotridge's boy?" Watrous laughed. "Of course I've got a place for you. I'll see McBride in the morning. Now tell me—"

Carlisle's smooth voice broke in. "I hate to interrupt, colonel, but

weren't you supposed to see Mr. Boyce?"

"That's right!" Watrous came ponderously to his feet. "I am. Right now, too. You stay here with Ellen, Rusty. I'll be back."

Watrous took his bulk across the lobby toward the desk. Carlisle had risen with the colonel. Now he seated himself again, his eyes on Rusty. Ellen was watching Carlisle, Rusty saw. Since he had joined them she had done nothing but watch him. Her blue eyes were soft. Marcia Carlisle was looking first at her brother, then at the other girl. The silence became awkward.

"You're in the cattle business, Mr. Shotridge?" Leonard Carlisle asked finally.

It was Ellen who answered. "Rusty was raised with cattle, Leonard. His father had a ranch next to dad's when we lived at Arroyo Grande. Rusty is a real hand. You ought to see him ride!"

Dull red came up across Rusty's cheekbones, and Ellen's voice went on. "Rusty taught me to ride. Do you remember old Paint, Rusty?"

Rusty nodded. There was an undercurrent here, something that he could feel, but not place. An antagonism. Ellen's voice was hurried, a little high, a small note in it that was not quite true. Looking from the red-haired girl to Marcia Carlisle, Rusty could see the amusement in Marcia's eyes, the tiny curl at the corners of her lips. Something existed between the girls, some cross purpose. Ellen chattered, recalling past occurrences. Marcia was quiet. Both girls watched Leonard Carlisle. Rusty said "yes" or "no" as Ellen referred to him, using him for corroboration. He had a sense of uneasiness, and with it came a feeling, almost of pity, for Ellen Watrous.

ELLEN'S chatter slowed. Marcia, with the check in the talk, arose gracefully from her chair. "Will you take me upstairs, Leonard?" she asked. "I'm tired. I know Ellen and Mr. Shotridge will excuse us. They're old friends and they have a great deal to talk about." She smiled flashingly at Rusty.

Carlisle came to his feet. Rusty arose when the other man got up. Carlisle's voice was pleasant when he said that he had been glad to meet Mr. Shotridge. There was warmth in it when he spoke to Ellen. Brother and sister crossed the lobby toward the stairs, and Ellen, leaning back in her chair, watched their progress. Rusty sat down again. The two Carlisles disappeared up the stairs.

For a time Rusty sat watching the spot where Marcia and her brother had disappeared. Marcia Carlisle was gone, but her memory remained, an ineffable presence.

Ellen Watrous' voice was bitter as she broke into her companion's thoughts. "Has she got you, too?"

"What's that?" Rusty demanded, turning quickly to the girl.

"Her brother, you, every man she meets," Ellen said. "That's the way she affects all of them."

Uncomfortably Rusty met the girl's eyes. There was sorrow in those eyes, and something else that Rusty could not fathom. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Look here, Sorrel-top," he said, changing the subject. "What's all this about? How come the colonel to take a greenhorn into pardnership with him? What's happened?"

"Dad had bad luck last year." Ellen's voice was abstract. "He lost money on the herds he sent up the trail. He needed capital, and Leonard wanted to go into partnership with him. They—" The words trailed off. Ellen rose from the chair.

"I think I'll go upstairs, Rusty. I'm tired."

She did not wait for his answer, but walked toward the stairs. Rusty followed her with his eyes. There was something wrong with Ellen. Plenty wrong. He put on his hat, pulling it down. Ellen was trailing up the stairs, a small figure, her shoulders drooping a trifle. Rusty Shotridge grunted. If there was anything wrong with Ellen Watrous, and he could fix it— He turned and, straight-backed, his shoulders swinging, made toward the door.

BUD SIGLOE and Tom Flanders were waiting for Rusty in the Bank Saloon. Rusty had not been expecting to find them there, and his face showed his surprise when he saw them. Sigloe came forward to greet Rusty, while Flanders, leaning against the bar, smiled his welcome.

Bud Sigloe was a far different man than he had been when Rusty first saw him. He was clean, shaven to the quick, and almost sober. The fine thin edge of excitement still clung to him as he accompanied Rusty back to where Flanders stood.

"What happened to you, Rusty?" Flanders demanded. "Bud an' me been waitin' here. Didn't you know there was a celebration comin' an' that you was in on it?"

"I went up to the hotel," explained Rusty. "I wanted to see Colonel Watrous."

"See him?"

Rusty nodded. The sober mood he had brought from the hotel clung with him. He could not shake it off. Flanders seemed to sense his depression.

"We're drinkin' beer, Bud an' me, but you have what you like," he invited companionably. "Then we'll pull out an' see what holds San Ysidro together."

"Beer suits me," Rusty said absently.

They had their drinks and left the Bank, going on from there to see what other attractions San Ysidro might offer. In the Tivoli they played roulette. In the Mint Sigloe bucked the blackjack dealer, while Flanders stood by. There was an air of high hilarity about Flanders and Sigloe. They were on the town and San Ysidro seemed to sense it. Gradually, as the trio went from place to place, they collected sycophants, a little crowd of satellites gathering about them. Everywhere they went they were welcome, and Rusty, in company with Flanders and Sigloe, accepted by them as a friend and equal, was swept up and carried along. Still he could not entirely turn loose and enjoy himself. Still the depression gained in the Stockman's lobby, stayed with him.

At midnight Rusty had had enough. Sigloe and Flanders were going strong, just beginning the night, but Rusty, with a week of steady riding behind him, wanted to sleep. Despite the protests of his friends, he left them and went back to the Stockman.

Before he left he had a final word with Bud Sigloe. Sigloe, throughout the evening, had introduced Rusty to all those he met as a member of his trail crew. Nor had Rusty demurred. He would ask nothing better than to go north with the herd Bud Sigloe bossed. Still there had been Watrous' promise of a job with the Watrous trail outfit, and Rusty spoke of it to Sigloe.

"Don't forget," Bud Sigloe said as the three parted. "Yo're goin' up the trail with me, kid. I'm goin' to learn you the business. You see Watrous in the mornin' an' tell him."

Rusty agreed, said good night to Flanders, and, leaving the Mint,

where they happened to be at that moment, started up the street.

THERE was a long porch across the front of the Stockman Hotel and, entering it from the side, Rusty found a chair and sat down. He

wanted to smoke and relax before he went up to his room. Leaning back in the shadow, he found his tobacco and papers and rolled his smoke. He was exploring his pockets, searching for a match, when two people came down along the porch and stopped close by. So preoccupied and intent were they on each other that they did not see him there in the shadow.

Rusty shifted in his chair, preparatory to rising and making his presence known, but Ellen Watrous' voice stopped him. The girl's voice was as bitter as her words.

"You don't care," she said. "If you did you wouldn't let her tell you what to do."

"But, Ellen—" the man protested. Rusty recognized the speaker as Leonard Carlisle.

"She never leaves us alone," Ellen declared passionately. "Never! Tonight, for instance. She wanted you to take her upstairs, so you left me and went with her. You do everything she says. You tell me that you love me, and then she calls you and you run to her."

"You don't understand, Ellen," Carlisle said. "Marcia's my sister. I—"

"I understand that you think more of her than you do of me," Ellen interrupted angrily. "I understand that she's got you under her thumb completely. I'm going in."

The girl turned and Rusty could hear her heels venting her anger in small staccato clicks as she went to the hotel door. Carlisle, having taken but a single step to follow, stood motionless. Ellen disappeared into the doorway and Carlisle groaned and walked to the porch rail.

Sigloe was already at the saloon when, at six sharp, Flanders came in. Rusty made his play then, a reckless, daring play loaded with dynamite.

Rusty moved a trifle and his chair squeaked.

Instantly Carlisle turned, his voice hoarse as he demanded: "Who's there?"

"Shotridge," Rusty answered uncomfortably, damning the squeaking chair in his mind.

Carlisle came from the porch rail. "You were spying!" he accused angrily. "That's what you were doing. You heard us."

"Well," Rusty said slowly, "I ain't deaf. But I wasn't spying. I sat down here to take a smoke, and before I could say a word you and Ellen were talkin'. I'm sorry—"

"Spy! That's what you are!" Carlisle paid no heed to Rusty's explanation. "Run and tell if you want to, but if you do I'll give you the whipping you deserve."

Rusty got deliberately to his feet. His intentions had been entirely pacific, but no one had ever promised Rusty Shotridge a licking without having the opportunity to make good.

"I'm right here," he drawled. "I wasn't spying on you, an' I'm not going to tell anybody, but if you think you can take it out of my hide, go ahead."

He was entirely ready to fight at

the moment, but he was not ready for what followed. Leonard Carlisle said nothing more. Instead, his hand lashed out, swift as the strike of a snake, and straight and forceful as a piston. The clenched hand collided with Rusty's cheek, and Rusty, braced as he was, sat down with a thump on the porch floor and banged his head against the chair.

For a moment bright lights filled Rusty's eyes. He reached out his hand for support, found the floor, and pushed himself up. When he reached his feet Carlisle was going through the lighted doorway of the Stockman Hotel. Tenderly Rusty felt of his eye, groped behind him and, finding his chair, sat down again.

"Well," said Rusty Shotridge. "What do you think of that now?"

UP early the following morning, through habit, Rusty dressed and left the Stockman. Breakfast over, he wandered along the street before returning to the hotel. San Ysidro in the morning was briskly alive with traffic along its streets. Rusty loafed along, savoring the bustle and vigor of the town. Now and then he met men who glanced at him keenly. Occasionally a passerby smiled. Rusty touched his eye tenderly; it was swollen almost shut from Carlisle's blow. He was keenly aware of the eye and of his appearance, and touchy concerning both. That blasted Carlisle!

At the post office Rusty inquired for his mail. Receiving none, he stood outside the building, listening to the familiar talk of the men standing around, talk of grass and water, cattle and horses. To these subjects was added another: the trail north, its condition, and the location of the herds that were being put up the trail.

Returning by way of the livery barn, where he inspected his horses, Rusty entered the Stockman's lobby. Watrous and Carlisle, with Ellen and Marcia, were in the lobby. Rusty spoke a good morning to them and would have passed, save that Watrous stopped him.

"Come over here, Rusty," he commanded. "By Jupiter! What happened to your eye, boy?"

"I got hit," Rusty answered shortly.

Watrous grinned broadly. "Fight or celebration?" he asked. "No matter. I want you to meet Scott McBride. Scott, this is the boy I spoke to you about. He'll go up the trail with you."

Rusty looked at the short, square-shouldered, gray-haired man that Watrous introduced. McBride was Watrous' trail boss, and he looked the part. Bud Sigloe's parting injunction flashed into Rusty's mind, and he cleared his throat awkwardly.

"I was goin' to speak to you about that, colonel" he said. "I've kind of changed my mind. I—"

Carlisle gave a contemptuous snort and Rusty stopped in midspeech and looked inquiringly at the man.

"I thought so," Carlisle said, glancing significantly at Watrous.

"What did you think?" Rusty asked quietly.

Carlisle faced him squarely. "I thought," he announced, "that you'd back out. You don't want to go north with a herd. All you want to do is to make an impression."

"Now see here, Leonard," Watrous began, "you've no right to say that. I know this boy and—"

Rusty interrupted his old friend's defense. His voice had dropped a tone and slowed a beat as he spoke. "You think I was four-flushin'?"

Carlisle shrugged. In itself that was answer enough, but he chose

to amplify it. "It takes a man to make the trip."

"You're a man?" Rusty asked quietly.

Carlisle said nothing. Rusty was angry clear through. He had been insulted, gratuitously he thought. His voice drawled on: "I reckon you're goin' to make the trip, Carlisle? Or had you ever thought of it?"

Carlisle stared at his questioner. A sudden gleam came into his eyes. "I'll go north with the herd if you will," he challenged. "How about it, Shotridge?"

"Leonard!" Marcia Carlisle said sharply. "You can't. You know you can't. I—"

Glancing at Ellen, Rusty saw that the red-haired girl's eyes were eager. There were a good many things in Rusty's mind, but cold anger was uppermost. He threw his soft drawl into Marcia Carlisle's words, checking them. "I got to quit a job with Bud Sigloe, to take you up, Carlisle. But if you mean that an' won't back out, I'm your huckleberry!"

CHAPTER III

A MESSAGE

SCOTT McBRIDE, entering the door of the Tivoli Saloon, nodded briefly to the bartender on morning shift and asked a question. "Slippery is back?"

"Him an' Yates," the bartender agreed, and then, stifling his natural curiosity behind a yawn: "Want me to call him?"

"I'll call him myself," McBride grunted, and stalked on toward the door in the rear of the barroom.

Passing through that door, he entered the private card room of the Tivoli. There was a big, green-covered poker table, chips stacked at the slot and two decks of cards beside the chips. Chairs were placed in some semblance of order about the table, and in two of these chairs men sat. Both looked up quickly as the door opened, and then recognizing their caller, relaxed once more. McBride came on back to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down.

Slippery Smith, his black eyes curious, turned his smooth bulk to face the newcomer, rubbing his hand down the length of his face from nose to chin speculatively.

"I didn't hardly look for you, Scott," he remarked. "You think it was all right for you to come back here?"

"I wouldn't of come if I hadn't had to," McBride said morosely. "It's all off, Slippery. I come to tell you that."

Smith glanced quickly at his other companion and returned his gaze to McBride. "Why?" he demanded. "Watrous bought the LM steers, didn't he?"

McBride nodded.

"I've still got them LM cattle I bought last year," Smith continued. "I'm puttin' up a herd an' I've got my boys hired. Why do you figure it's off, Scott? You gettin' cold feet?"

"My feet ain't any colder than anybody else's," McBride retorted testily. "But it's all off, just the same. You heard what happened in the hotel yesterday, didn't you?"

A smile appeared on Smith's face. "Oh, *that!*" he commented. "Yeah. I heard. Seems like yo're goin' to have more crew than you counted on."

McBride nodded again. "Carlisle, blast him!" he rasped. "He's bound he's goin' with me, an' so is Shotridge."

"Well—" Smith's drawl pulled

lingeringly on the word. "You ain't worried about Carlisle, are you? Look, Scott, you hired the boys I sent for you to hire, didn't you?"

Again the morose nod of McBride's head. Smith drawled on: "Then what you worryin' about? Carlisle can't count cattle. He'll believe any count you give him."

"IT ain't Leonard Carlisle I'm bothered about," McBride replied. "It's that doggone Shotridge. Look here, Slippery. Shotridge an' Carlisle had an argument in the hotel this mornin' Shotridge was goin' to back out an' not go with us, an' Carlisle called him a quitter. Shotridge bristled up an' said he'd go if Carlisle would. Carlisle took him up on it. Shotridge is packin' a black eye, an' I think Carlisle give it to him. They're sore as hell at each other. An' they're hell-bent to go north with me, both of 'em. Neither of 'em'll back out. Watrous is about half-crazy with the trouble they're givin' him, an' I've done everything but quit. I couldn't do that, could I?"

"No," Smith agreed gravely. "You couldn't do that. But can't Watrous—"

"Watrous needs Carlisle's money or there won't be no herd," McBride interrupted bluntly. "Carlisle says that either him an' Shotridge go, or he don't put up the cash. Watrous can't do nothin'. He tried to work on Shotridge. Shotridge had a job with Bud Sigloe, but he says if Carlisle goes with me, he goes with me. Carlisle says he goes with me an' so does Shotridge, or else there'll be no cattle. They both got pat hands an' they're sittin' there playin' 'em, an' I can't do a damned thing. An' neither can Watrous!"

A frown appeared on Slippery Smith's dark face.

"*An'*," McBride amplified, "if Shotridge goes along you an' me can't do what we'd planned. You know that. We'd never get by with it. I been checkin' up on Shotridge an' he's a hand, from all I can hear, an' a pretty forked kind of fellow besides."

"How do you mean 'forked'?"

"He's the boy that sided that ranger down at Arroyo Grande last year."

Smith's companion, slight, blue-eyed and light-haired, shifted in his chair. So far he had made no contribution to the talk. Now he asked: "What was that?"

"You was in the Territory when it happened, Honey," Smith answered. "There was some fellows got tough around Arroyo Grande last fall an' took in the town. Austin sent a ranger down to stop it. He got two or three of 'em arrested, an' was takin' 'em out when the rest jumped him. They had him down an' hurt when another fellow come along. From what McBride says, it was Shotridge."

"It was Shotridge all right," McBride asserted surlily. "He jumped in an' sided the ranger an' they just cleaned up. Both the Bascomb boys was killed an' there was two-three more hurt pretty bad."

Smith said, "Hm-m-m," and the man called Honey surveyed the long fingers of his hand where they were spread on the table top.

"So Carlisle an' Shotridge are goin' along," McBride declared after a short pause. "It's all off, Slippery."

Again there was a long silence. "I'll be damned if I'm goin' to pass up seven or eight thousand dollars that easy!" Smith said savagely. "Blast this Shotridge. I—"

"It might be fixed so that he won't

go." Honey Yates lifted his gaze from his fingers and stared mildly, first at McBride and then at Smith. "How much of a cut would I get if I fixed it for you, Slippery?"

Smith took a quick breath. "Shotridge is hangin' around with Sigloe an' Flanders," he warned. "They're friends of his."

Yates was nodding earnestly. "I've heard that," he agreed. "It makes it worth a little more money. How much, Slippery?"

Slippery Smith pulled his chair around so that he faced the table. Honey Yates also pulled his chair closer to the green felt.

"It would be worth five hundred dollars," Smith announced. "Carlisle wouldn't bother you if Shotridge didn't go, would he, Scott?"

"I don't think so," McBride said uneasily. "No, I guess he wouldn't."

"Then it would be worth a little more if Shotridge didn't reach Dodge City," Smith said. He looked at Honey Yates again.

Yates laughed mirthlessly. "It's worth a third," he announced flatly. "We'll cut it three ways instead of two. You know better than to fool with me, Slippery. Three ways?"

There was a moment of indecision, and then Slippery Smith nodded. "I'd rather have some than none," he agreed. "Three ways if Shotridge don't reach Dodge, Honey."

Honey Yates gave a satisfied grunt. "That's settled, then," he said. "How are you figurin' to work it, Slippery? I know you got some LM steers from last year an' I know that Watrous has bought all the LM steers left this year. How you goin' to put the two together?"

"Easy," Slippery Smith answered. "Just plumb easy, Honey. Scott an' me'll fix that if you look after Shotridge. We got it all lined up. Got the boys hired an' everythin'."

McBride got up abruptly. "I'm goin' to pull out," he announced. "I come down to tell you that it was all off, Slippery, but if Honey cuts in an' takes care of Shotridge, I guess we'll go on. You tell Honey what it's all about. I'm goin'. It wouldn't look too good later if somebody remembered that you an' me had been together."

Wheeling from the card table, McBride went to the door, passed through it and on out of the Tivoli Saloon. As he went up the street he passed the hotel. Rusty Shotridge was on the porch, and Marcia Carlisle, occupying a chair facing Rusty, was bent forward talking earnestly to him. As McBride passed he scowled at the two on the

porch. Rusty saw neither the passing trail boss nor his scowl.

IT had been a bad day and night for Rusty. During practically all of that time he had been under fire. First, Colonel Watrous had argued with him, ordering him to withdraw from the enterprise to which Rusty had been challenged. Watrous had

stormed and raged and threatened, but Rusty remained adamant. He could understand exactly how Watrous felt, but that did not change his own viewpoint. Nor had Scott McBride's arguments and threats altered his decision.

"You stay with this an' I'll make hell look like a summer holiday to you," McBride promised. "I don't want you along an' I don't want Carlisle neither!"

Rusty stared balefully at the angry trail boss. Threats were not the proper weapons to use on Rusty Shotridge. "Go right ahead an' turn your wolf loose, McBride," he invited. "But you want to remember one thing: There's two ends to the trail, an' I'll be at both of them. This end is yours, but the other one will be mine an' don't you forget it."

McBride, realizing the futility of his threat, snorted wrathfully and stamped away.

Then had come Ellen Watrous. Ellen almost made her point. She neither threatened nor argued. Her attack was purely feminine, and under it Rusty weakened.

"You think a heap of Carlisle," he told the girl. "If he thinks as much of you as you do of him, he'll back out. It won't be any disgrace for him to back down, but I've got to live in this country. You talk to Carlisle, Ellen. If he backs down, I'll step out, too."

Ellen spread her hands in a helpless gesture of surrender. "I've talked to Leonard," she admitted. "He's determined to go through with it. You'll have to give in, Rusty. Please. For my sake."

For an instant Rusty was ready to agree, but Ellen, not content with what she had said, continued: "He's proud, Rusty, and he can't back out. It would hurt him."

Rusty bristled. "Mebbe you think I ain't a little proud!" he rasped. "No, Ellen. Carlisle made the bet an' I called it. If he got out on a limb, it's his fault. You go talk to him and not to me."

Of all those who talked to him, only Bud Sigloe and Tom Flanders agreed with Rusty, had understood at all, or been on his side.

"You couldn't do nothin' else, kid," Flanders stated when Rusty presented his problem. "You had to do it."

Bud Sigloe seconded Flanders. "That's right," he agreed, and then, smiling at Rusty: "I hate to lose you off my crew, but you got to play your hand out. Tom an' me'll meet you in Dodge City an' we'll throw a whingding when you get there. Stay with it, kid."

That was the way that matters stood when Marcia Carlisle met Rusty on the porch of the Stockman Hotel and asked him to talk with her.

Rusty knew what was coming, but he could not well refuse the girl. As graciously as he was able, he accompanied her to where two chairs were placed side by side, and when Marcia was seated, took the other chair. Marcia proceeded at once to her attack.

"I want you to give up this foolish venture," she said. "Leonard is all I have, Mr. Shotridge. We were left orphans when we were children, and I've always looked after him. I'm a year older than my brother, and I've always felt that responsibility. I can't let him go. Suppose that he was hurt? How would you feel if that happened? You'd be responsible."

Rusty considered the question and the girl. Marcia was beautiful as she sat there looking at him and,

for an instant, Rusty's mind wandered from the topic. A girl like Marcia Carlisle was—

"How would you feel?" Marcia demanded again.

"I reckon that would be bad," Rusty said gravely. "But there isn't much chance of his bein' hurt."

"But suppose he was?"

For some reason Rusty felt that he must explain his philosophy to his companion, justify himself in her eyes. He looked at Marcia very steadily.

"A fellow," he said, "has got to stand on his own two legs, Miss Carlisle. He's got to do that if he's goin' to be a man. You want your brother to be a man, don't you?"

Marcia could not answer that question other than in the affirmative. She took a new tack. "But what about me?" she asked. "Leonard's all that I have. I can't let him go. I don't think you understand."

"How old is your brother?" Rusty asked casually.

"Twenty-three," answered Marcia.

"I'm older than him," Rusty said. "Older than you, too. I'm twenty-six. I've had experience. You've rode herd on your brother all his life, all yours, too. You've spoiled him and pampered him, and you've got him tied to your apron strings. It'll be good for both of you for him to get away. If he cuts loose he's got a fair chance of makin' a man of himself. Goin' up the trail will learn him some things he needs to know."

Anger darkened Marcia's eyes. Still she controlled her temper. "I'll pay you—" she began.

"*Pay* me?" Rusty cut her off curtly. "How could you pay me? If I backed down I'd be the laughin' stock of the country. I've got to live here, don't you understand that? No—I reckon you wouldn't. You don't know enough."

"But Leonard is all I have," the girl protested. "You—"

Rusty was thoroughly aroused. The offer of money had broken his restraint, and his own anger flared through. "Yeah," he drawled, "he's all you've got. An' he's a spoiled brat. Mebbe if he cuts loose from you he can turn into a man; an' mebbe if you cut him loose, you'll have time to look around an' get you a man of your own!"

Marcia came up out of her chair. Why, you—" she choked, and her right hand, flashing out, spatted sharply against Rusty's cheek. "You . . . you—" She was gone then, flouncing along the porch, anger showing in every line of her lithe body. Rusty sat watching her go, rubbing his cheek gently, and amusement beginning to grow in his eyes.

"An' mebbe there was somethin' in what I said, at that," he murmured. "Well—"

He hoisted himself out of his chair and he, too, started down the porch. Before he reached the door, Ellen Watrous appeared. Rusty stopped and waited for the girl to approach.

ELLEN was dejected. She stopped beside Rusty. Looking down at the girl, he felt sudden compassion for her.

"You talk to Carlisle, Sorrel-top?" he asked.

She nodded.

"What did he say?"

"He's going. I talked to him, but—" Ellen lifted her eyes to look at Rusty. "You know," she said, and there was a wondering note in her voice, "it isn't just because of you that Leonard's going. He's excited about it. He's— Why, he's

happy, Rusty. As though he were getting away from something."

"Mebbe he is," Rusty said thoughtfully. "Yeah. I reckon he is gettin' away from somethin'. This trip isn't goin' to hurt that boy,

Ellen. It's goin' to do him a lot of good."

"But suppose something happens to him?"

"Nothin's goin' to happen to him." Rusty was very sure. Ellen placed her small hand on his arm and stared up into his eyes.

"Will you look after him, Rusty?" she asked, her voice small. "Will you take care of him for me?"

"He's big enough to take care of himself," Rusty answered, and sudden uneasiness welled up in his mind. Here was a turn of events he had not foreseen and did not like. "He's old enough to look after himself, Ellen." He was reassuring himself as well as the girl.

"But he doesn't know how," Ellen pleaded. "Promise me that you'll look after him, Rusty. Promise me."

Rusty could not refuse. Here was the little Sorrel-top that he had played with down along Arroyo Grande. "Yeah," he said reluctantly. "All right, Ellen. I'll look after him for you."

Ellen rose on tiptoe. Impulsively her arms went around Rusty's neck and there, in full daylight, on the porch of the Stockman Hotel, she kissed him on the cheek.

Leonard Carlisle, coming from the door of the hotel in search of Ellen, was just in time to see that swift kiss. He stepped back hastily, so retiring that he did not see the end nor hear the denouement. Rusty reached up and lifted Ellen's arms away.

"Here," he ordered gruffly. "You made enough trouble already. You save that for Carlisle."

For the remainder of the day Rusty was left alone. He did not seek companionship, and no one sought him. There was a good deal on Rusty's mind, and none of it was pleasant. His promise to Ellen came constantly to remind him of the obligation he had undertaken, and his conversation with Marcia Carlisle arose to haunt him. Rusty could not keep his thoughts from the dark-haired girl. Wherever he turned, her face confronted him. He was distrait and uneasy.

WHEN evening came, Rusty joined Tom Flanders and Bud Sigloe for supper. After the meal, walking along the street, side by side, Flanders asked Rusty a question:

"How'd you come out today, kid?"

"I had hell all day. They all worked on me."

"But yo're still goin' with Watrous?" Sigloe looked keenly at Rusty.

"Still goin'."

There was no disapproval in Flanders' silent nod or in Sigloe's grunt of agreement, but Rusty continued, voicing the thoughts that troubled him: "You know how it is. You ought to, anyhow. I've got to go through with it. I made my brags."

To the two men who flanked Rusty, that was sufficient. Rusty had stated his position when he said that he had made his brags. Each of

his companions had been in a similar predicament, and recently. Bud Sigloe, aching from inaction, had inflicted himself upon the town, and Flanders had been summoned to quiet him. As simple a thing as that had almost brought about tragedy. With no real reason for a quarrel, no cause other than their fierce pride, these two who walked beside Rusty, had come to a point where, despite their friendship, they would have killed. And Rusty had saved them from that killing. Bud Sigloe took a long breath, and Tom Flanders spoke quietly.

"We know how it is, kid. But ain't you bein' as much a proddy fool as Bud an' me were?"

Rusty shook his head. "That was different," he answered. "You an' Bud are friends an' you'd just got crossways with each other. Everybody knows that you ain't scared. You've proved it. If I backed out I'd get the horse laugh every place I went."

The statement was true and Flanders nodded. "Bud an' me are leavin' tomorrow," he said abruptly. "Marble wrote Bud that he's puttin' up a herd at Pinál, an' he wants Bud to come on. I'm goin' back to Dulcina, an' then on north."

Flanders hesitated and Rusty looked keenly at the tall man. "We're right fond of you," Flanders continued after the instant's hesitation. "Doggoned if I know why." He grinned, belying his last words, and Rusty returned the grin.

"Go on an' tell him, Tom," Sigloe growled.

"I've got a friend or two in town," Flanders continued. "I hear things. So does Bud. Some of these friends we got ain't exactly what you'd call good citizens. I'd feel a heap easier if you was goin' with Bud."

Sigloe grunted affirmatively.

"Why don't you do that, kid?" Flanders asked persuasively. "Nobody'd think any less of you."

Rusty shook his head stubbornly. "I made my brags," he reminded. "I got to go through with 'em."

"I told you he'd say that, Tom," said Sigloe.

"Yeah, you told me," Flanders agreed. "Well then, kid, keep yore eyes open."

Rusty looked sharply at Flanders, a question in the glance.

"I'd feel mighty bad if you didn't show up in Dodge to have that party with Bud an' me," Flanders continued.

"So would I," added Sigloe. "It might be a good idea if we spread that word around, Tom."

"Not bad at all," Flanders agreed.

They were taking care of him, Rusty felt. His shoulders squared and a spark came into his eyes. "You wouldn't feel half as bad about it as I would," he said quietly. "I'll make sure to be there."

"Uh-huh," Sigloe agreed.

A warning had been given, recognized, and accepted. Flanders nodded. "We know you can take care of yorese'f, Rusty," he said apologetically. "We just thought— Look, here's the Bank. Let's step in awhile."

As night came on and darkness grew, the Bank Saloon filled. Bud Sigloe, Tom Flanders and Rusty stayed together. The morning would see their separation, and the thought was somehow depressing. In the short time they had been together a friendship had formed that bound them closely. They drank a little, talked a little, but for the most part were content simply to be together without talk or drink or other companionship. The few men who came to join them sensed their mood and did not stay.

ABOUT nine o'clock a boy, half grown, came through the door of the Bank Saloon and spoke to the bartender. The barman nodded to the table that Rusty occupied with Sigloe and Flanders, and the boy came on back.

"Shotridge?" he asked, pausing beside the table.

"I'm Shotridge," Rusty said.

"There's a man wants to see you up at the hotel. He give me a quarter to tell you."

Rusty looked first at the boy, and then at Flanders and Sigloe. "Watrous, likely," he said. "He wants to take another round at me. I'll go see him, son."

The boy turned away, but Flanders halted him. "What does this man look like?" he questioned.

"He was on the porch when I come past an' he called to me," answered the boy. "I didn't get to look at him good. It was dark."

Flanders nodded and the boy went on his way. Rusty started to rise from his chair. Flanders and Sigloe had looked at each other and now Sigloe reached out his hand to restrain Rusty's movement.

"You can finish yore drink, can't you?" Sigloe demanded. "There ain't that much hurry, is there? After all, we're splittin' up tomorrow."

Rusty sat down again and picked up his half-emptied glass. Flanders arose. "I'll be back in a minute," he announced, and abruptly left the table. Sigloe bent toward Rusty and spoke, and Rusty, who had been watching Flanders, turned back to his other companion.

Sigloe kept on talking and perforce Rusty listened. His impatience grew. Bud was just making talk and Flanders had not come back. When Sigloe paused, Rusty spoke.

"Look, Bud. I'll go up an' see what Watrous wants. You wait an' tell Tom I'll be right back."

"All right," Sigloe agreed. "We'll leave word at the bar for him an' I'll go with you."

There was no way for Rusty to refuse that suggestion, and so they started out together. At the door Sigloe brushed past Rusty, stepping out into the street ahead of him.

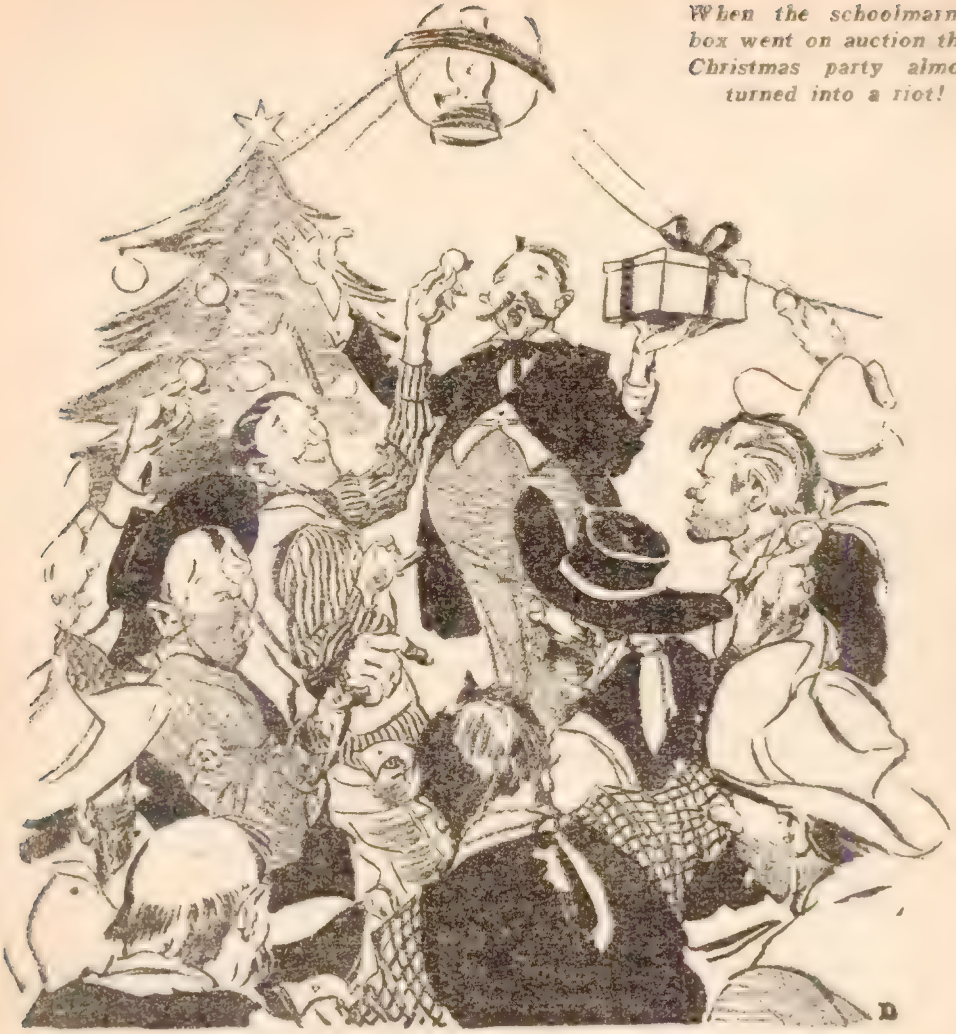
San Ysidro was dark. There were no street lights, and the only illumination came from the windows of the stores and saloons. Sigloe, taking the outside edge of the walk, started along toward the hotel, Rusty striding with him. They passed a man or two, and Rusty, looking on past his companion, could see movement across the way. His thoughts intent on what was coming, he paid no attention to the movement. What argument would Watrous advance now? he wondered. What had happened that he should be sent for? Had Carlisle backed down? Had Marcia and Ellen and Watrous made their point with him?

"Mebbe I'll be taking that job with you after all, Bud," Rusty said suddenly. "Mebbe the colonel has worked things out an' sent for me to fire me. What would you think of that?"

"I'd think—" Sigloe began, and stopped short. He thrust out his arm, sending Rusty staggering away. They were just at a corner and Rusty reeled into the entryway of a darkened store. Across the street flame lanced out and the roar of a shot filled the quiet.

Who fired the shot that Rusty and Bud heard? Where did Tom Flanders go? Was it really Colonel Watrous who sent the message to Rusty? Suspense and stirring drama deepen in the second installment of this powerful story of the great trail drives. Don't miss it!

When the schoolmarm's box went on auction that Christmas party almost turned into a riot!



BOX-SUPPER BOOMERANG

BY RUEL McDANIEL

THE Running W bunkhouse looked as though a small hurricane had struck it, and it smelled like a barber shop. The boys were all humming, whistling or singing, according to individual notions of expressing Christmas cheer; all, that is, except Pokey Callahan. Even a stiff swig from the bottle the boys were passing around failed to bring any cheer to Pokey's solemn countenance.

"I'll go," he mumbled, "but my heart ain't in it." He got up from his bunk and ambled toward the wash basin, his legs describing a beautiful arch as he walked. They

were perfectly shaped legs for riding a horse; but the trouble was they held that shape after Pokey got out of the saddle. "If I didn't have that five-spot bet on Slim's buying the schoolmarm's box, I wouldn't go," he added gloomily.

Slim Warren, the Running W foreman, didn't look too cheerful himself. He was the youngest foreman in the valley; but then the Running W was the smallest outfit, too, and one of the poorest. It had been tough on all the little spreads since the Matador outfit began expanding and hogging the best range and water.

"What's gnawin' you, Pokey?" Slim asked now, his gray eyes twinkling a little. "Ain't Tillie goin' to the box supper?"

"That's jest it," Pokey moaned, misery showing in his large blue eyes. "She's goin' and I won't get to eat supper with her. She—"

"Hi, buckaroos," a shrill, feminine voice called from outside the bunkhouse. "Come on out and see my new dress."

"There's Tillie now," said Heck Smith. Eagerly the boys crowded out into the yard. One of the rannies once said Tillie would be a fine bean stalk if she stood still long enough. She was wriggling around now, trying to reach a hook on the neck of her dress.

"Here, one of you fellers snap this top hook for me," she said. "I can't reach it."

"Reckon that's yore job, Pokey," Heck suggested.

Tillie gave Pokey a rather disdainful look but he reached up and brought the hook and eye together with his stubby, trembling fingers.

"There you are, T-tillie," he stammered. "Gosh, you shore look purty this evenin' an' you smell good, too."

Tillie blushed and giggled, her Adam's apple bobbing up and down her skinny throat like the suction rod on a windmill. Alongside Tillie's five feet eleven, Pokey's five-seven inches looked puny, especially with some inches of his natural height taken out in the curve of his legs.

"Got to look my best for Dude," Tillie volunteered with obvious pride.

The rest of the hands laughed, but Pokey sulked in heartbroken embarrassment.

"You varmints can laugh all you want," he said when they went back in the bunkhouse, "but I love that woman and it kinda makes me blue when she lets that fourflushin' Dude Watkins turn her head thataway. He courts every gal on the range. Why, I heard him pokin' fun at Tillie down at the Flats the other day, but it wouldn't be no use tellin' her that. She wouldn't believe me. I'd have taken a poke at him if he would a-got off his hoss. Well, I shore hope Slim gets Mis' Virginia's box tonight. That'll take some of the wind outa Dude. It'll win me five cartwheels, to boot."

"I got four simoleons bet on Slim, myself," Heck Smith commented.

"I bet two dollars on Slim this mornin'. Would've bet more if I'd had it," volunteered another cowboy.

"Better go slow on them wagers, boys," Slim warned. "You know all the Matador boys'll back their lady-killin' foreman. If Dude makes up his mind to buy Miss Virginia's box, they'll all chip in and help him. They'd be afraid not to. Of course you all know how I feel about that little schoolmarm, and I'd as soon see her eat supper with a horse thief as Dude Watkins. She'd be safer. But the Matadors outnumber us more than four to one, and they'll

beat us in the biddin' if they set their heads to it." Slim ran his fingers through sandy red hair and sighed, his face almost as gloomy as Pokey's.

JOHN HENDRIX, owner of the Running W, his wife, two kids and Tillie the cook, piled into the buckboard an hour before sundown and set off for Segoville Flats, six miles distant. Pretty soon the cowboys mounted and rode after the vehicle. Folks around the Flats were very unfashionable; they all wanted to be early. The Christmas Eve box supper had been the talk of the whole valley for weeks. It offered a rare chance for distant neighbors to get together for range talk and gossip, and the proceeds from the sale of the boxes was for a good cause—to buy a new organ for the combination schoolhouse and church. Raising the money in this manner had been Miss Virginia Denson's idea, and naturally all the cowboys were for it. She was the prettiest and nicest schoolteacher the Flats had ever had. Even the women admitted that.

As the rannies from the Running W rode into town, with Slim and Pokey in the lead, darkness already was settling over the little valley community. Lights were popping on in the houses, and the schoolhouse was a blaze of cheerful brightness. Ma Jackson's boardinghouse, across the street from the schoolhouse, was almost as gayly lit. It was here that the women had agreed to carry their boxes in secrecy. Here they would remain until time for the auction; then some of the men would tote them over to the schoolhouse. In that way nobody would know who had brought each box. That mystery naturally would lend zest to the bidding. Of course it was understood that most husbands would buy their wives boxes at moderate bids because there would be little competition.

As Pokey, Slim and the other Running W boys dismounted and tied their ponies a distance from the schoolhouse, they could see that the house was beginning to pack already. A bunch of cowboys crowded around the front door, building up their courage to go in.

"Well, well," commented Dude Watkins, as the Running W boys approached, "here come the killer-dillers from the hills. We can start the program now!" The other Matador cowhands laughed raucously. "What'll yuh give me to tell yuh which is Miss Virginia's box?" Dude bantered. "She's already told me." That was occasion for more Matador humor.

"Well, if she tole you," barked Pokey, "we don't want to know. Only she ain't tole you. That's jest some more of yore wind-baggin'. If you was half as good as you calculate you are, that feller Don Won wouldn't ask a gal for a date. He'd be afeared of bein' turned down account of you!"

"Want to bet some more I don't buy the schoolmarm's box?" Dude demanded.

"You danged tootin'!" Heck Smith put in. "Here's another five you don't get it."

"Better go slow there, Heck," Slim whispered out of the corner of his mouth. "They can outbid us if they want to." But Heck ignored the warning. Pokey, too, shelled out another five dollars and dared any Matador ranny to call it. Five men squabbled over the right to cover his money.

"Mebbe we'll toss you hungry coyotes some corn pone," taunted a

Matador rider, "if the schoolmarm packs any in her box."

A few minutes before Pokey had noticed Dude talking in a low voice to Billy Jackson, the boardinghouse keeper's eleven-year-old boy. He noticed, too, that Billy did not speak to him and the other Running W boys with the same enthusiasm that he usually showed when they came to town. While they were still talking, the boy disappeared into the boardinghouse.

The Running W boys strolled inside and filled a long seat not far from the door. "Funny thing," Pokey commented.

"What's so funny?" asked Heck Smith.

"Billy Jackson hangin' around with that Matador bunch," Pokey explained. "First time I ever saw him do it. Somethin's a-brewin'."

The room buzzed with low talk and suppressed excitement, but the strains of a fiddle, banjo and the wheezy old organ rose above the din and cast a spell of cheer and expectancy over the audience. A Christmas tree had been hauled in and set up in one corner of the room, and strings of green paper, studded here and there with red berries, hung on the walls.

Oldsters with gray beards played the stringed instruments and Virginia Denson was at the organ. She looked too beautiful to be human, Slim thought, in that high-necked black velvet dress, with her large brown eyes glowing with excitement, and the sparkling comb fastened in her raven-black hair. Inside Slim rose a tumult that was far from the calm and peace Christmas is supposed to bring.

Two school children recited poems about Santa Claus, then the Simpson twins sang a duet.

During the duet several of the Matador riders strolled in, taking seats across the aisle from the Running W boys. Dude Watkins had not yet entered. Noticing this, Pokey squirmed in growing restlessless. Finally he picked up his hat and went outside.

Just as Pokey walked down the steps, Dude came toward the building, walking hurriedly. Pokey peered into the semidarkness and saw a boy hurrying around the corner of the house.

"Hey, Billy!" Pokey called. Dude pretended not to see him and strode on into the schoolhouse.

THE trio played a couple of other pieces, then Miss Virginia sang a solo. The Matadors and the Running W boys tried to outdo each other with their applause. While the next number was being played, men tiptoed across the rear of the stage with boxes in their arms and stacked them up against the Christmas tree.

In the pile were boxes with green tissue around them, others tied with dainty baby ribbon, dinner pails decorated to conceal their everydayness, small hat boxes, shoe boxes—containers of all sizes and shapes, each with its gay trimming. The great stack grew bigger and bigger, and when the last box was in place, the audience applauded appreciatively.

Judge King made a brief talk, explaining the purpose of the box supper and expressing the hope that the bidding would be honest—and liberal. "And don't forget, boys," he concluded, "there'll be dancing after supper. You get a fine supper, a girl to eat it with you and a dancing partner, all for the price of the box!" He beckoned Fog Clancy, auctioneer for the occasion.

Clancy grinned appreciatively as

the crowd cheered him and when he cleared his throat the sound was audible half a block away.

"None of you rannies is supposed to know what lady's name's in any box," he drawled, "but I g'arantee there's a name of a purty woman in each and every one. You may not know whose box you're buyin', but you won't get stuck.

"From the way some of you young bucks is moonin' and eyin' some of these young ladies, though, I got my suspicions that you got a purty good idear about the ownership of certain of these here boxes. So the rest of you rannies, make 'em pay and pay plenty for cheatin' on you that way!" Everybody laughed and applauded.

With a flourish, Fog picked up the first box. "I can tell by the feel that here's a supper fit for a president and too doggone good for a cowpoke, but somebody's goin' to get it. What'm I offered gents?"

A rancher from down the valley made a bid of fifty cents.

"That's a insult!" Fog bellowed, and everybody laughed. "Who'll make it a dollar?" Some town man bid seventy-five cents, and finally it went to the original bidder for a dollar and a quarter, and his wife sighed with relief.

As the bidding grew a little more spirited, the Running W boys bid occasionally, and one of them bought a box for a dollar. The Matador crew bid lightly but there obviously was no particular interest in any box so far offered. They sat in subdued expectancy, exchanging glances and head shakes as each new box came up for auction. Two of them finally bought boxes cheap, but showed no elation in their purchases.

More than two-thirds of the packages had been sold when Fog picked up a beautiful square box covered with green paper and tied with red baby ribbon.

"The gent that gets this will get a mighty good meal and a pretty gal besides," Fog remarked, " 'cause only a sweet dainty woman could fix a box like this." He hefted the package, turning it around on his big palm and commenting on its size and symmetry.

Slim saw the Matador boys suddenly grow quiet and tense. All of them were watching Dude. "That's Miss Virginia's!" Slim whispered to Heck Smith. The whisper traveled like a prairie fire down the line of Running W boys. Of all the rannies, only Pokey seemed unperturbed.

"Well, what'm I offered?" Fog began.

The Running W bunch waited on the Matadors to open the bid; and obviously the Matador gang wanted the Running Ws to take the initiative, so neither opened the bidding. Instead, a town man offered two dollars.

"A bid of two dollars from Billy," Fog roared. "I know it's Billy because only a billy goat would have the nerve to offer so little. What am I offered for this box of delicious grub, boys?"

As he held the container high, with one side in such a position that the light shone clearly on it, a tiny silver star sparkled.

"As I thought," Slim said. "The box's marked, and I got a guess some dirty work's been goin' on. That's why the Matador outfit perked up the minute the box came in sight!"

"Three dollars!" yelled Heck Smith.

"Four dollars!" a Matador man bellowed, and the bidding was really under way.

It reached eight dollars before a

Matador bidder broke into half dollars, bidding eight fifty. By half dollars it went up and up. Pretty soon it was eighteen dollars and seventy-five cents. That threw the Running W boys into a financial huddle. They pooled their cash and made one more bid. The Matadors raised it to a flat twenty dollars, the offer coming from Dude Watkins himself. He smirked at Slim and his boys.

"Come on, pikers," he called across the aisle. "We're jest warmin' up!"

SLIM looked at Pokey and flung his hands in resignation. "That's more cash than we can muster. I told you not to bet so danged much!"

"Let 'em have it," Pokey said with disarming calm.

The box went to Dude Watkins, who grinned possessively at Miss Virginia. He kept up a continual banter with the Running W boys across the aisle.

Tillie, who was sitting with the schoolteacher, obviously assumed that Dude's smile was meant for her because she smiled blushingly back at him.

Two or three other boxes sold at moderate prices, one going to a Running W cowboy. Then a huge creation, apparently a disguised hat box, came up. It was covered with white crepe paper and had real holly leaves glued to it. A bunch of red berries tied into a bouquet on top was the crowning touch.

Pokey opened the bid at one dollar. Apparently out of pure mischief, Dude raised the price to two dollars.

"Bid three for me!" Pokey whispered to Slim. The foreman made the offer.

A town man raised it to three fifty. Pokey nudged Slim.

"Four dollars!" Slim yelled.

"Sold to Slim Warren for four dollars!" Fog announced finally when no more bids were forthcoming, "and a bargain he got!"

Presently the last box was sold and the crowd again began to buzz with expectancy.

"You ladies know who bought yore boxes," Fog announced. "So go to yore partners and prepare their suppers. Don't forget there's dancin' afterwards!"

Slim handed Pokey the box he had bought, picked up his hat and started moving toward the aisle, his face showing his disappointment. A slight commotion halted his movement and perked up his interest. It was Tillie. She was striding down the aisle, shoving aside all who blocked her. She was as one in a trance, a look of bliss on her lean face. With a final stride she reached Dude Watkins.

"Dude!" she gasped, pumping his hand, "I didn't know you keered *that* much!"

Standing on a bench and watching the proceedings, Pokey snickered audibly. Slim scratched his head in puzzlement.

"What the— Hey! What *is* this?" Dude muttered. "This is Miss Virginia's box, ain't it?"

"Course not, silly," said Tillie, "it's mine. Didn't you—know it was mine?"

"Holy smokes, no!" Dude bellowed. He pushed the big, beautifully decorated box at Tillie and dived for the door.

"Haw-haw!" cackled Pokey.

Attention was mercifully diverted from Tillie as Virginia Denson came up to Slim, smiling demurely.

"I believe you bought my box, Mr. Warren," she said graciously. "Shall we find a place to spread our supper?"

Slim dropped his hat and forgot to pick it up. His eyes were wide with amazement and sudden delight. "Ah . . . er . . . shore, ma'am, shore!" he managed to gulp. He turned around to the other Running W rannies. "Come on, boys!" he called. "Bring your partners and boxes and we'll have a Running W spread for fair!"

Most of the boys had managed to tie onto a box by the time the auction was over, and they now followed Slim and Virginia to a long bench in the corner of the room; all, that is, except Pokey. He lagged behind.

"Oh, Pokey," he heard a faint voice behind him. Then a hand touched his shoulder in a manner that suggested the owner of the hand was afraid it might be snapped off.

"Pokey, would you like to eat supper with me?" begged Tillie.

Pokey was trembling with happiness, but he controlled his face. "Mebbe," he said coldly, "if you're right shore you're through with that Dude."

"A woman can do the foolishest things, honey," Tillie admitted, squeezing Pokey's arm.

"I GUESS you'll be wantin' to ride in the buckboard with Tillie," Slim said to Pokey when the festivities were over and everybody was starting home. "I'll lead yore pony for you if you'll jest tell me what happened."

Pokey grinned. "Well, when I saw Dude skulkin' outside with Billy Jackson, I figgered somethin' was up," he explained, "knowin' the boxes was all at the Jackson boardin' house. So I cornered Billy and put the clamps on him, so to speak. He finally cottoned that Dude had paid him four bits to stick that silver star on Mis' Virginia's box. So—"

"The cheap—" Slim began.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Pokey went on. "So I paid Billy a dollar to switch the star to Tillie's box. I figgered when Dude got stuck that away he'd blow up and insult Tillie, which same he did. I figgered then as how Tillie would appreciate a honest, upright hombre like me, which same she did!" Pokey's face arranged in a blissful grin. "Boy, this shore has been one swell Christmas, hasn't it?"

THE END.

DESERT

The arid stretch of country lying between the Colorado River and the Coastal range has changed radically during the past quarter of a century. The wagon track that once wound through sage and greasewood has become a smooth, wide stretch of pavement. Windmills pump the purest, finest water in the world from underground reservoirs. Instead of the mirage of the thirsty pioneer, there are lakes fed by continuous streams of artesian water, and where once the Forty-niners had to haul hay for the stock, nine crops of alfalfa are cut annually. The traveler crossing Death Valley, thinking of the hardships of those who first dared the desert, comes to a slight rise and sees spread before him miles of cultivated fields, long lines of cottonwoods three feet in diameter; ranchhouses with orchards in full bloom, or later in the year loaded with the world's finest peaches and pears. As he comes closer he sees clear, cold water gushing from full pipes eight inches in diameter into open tanks holding thousands of gallons for irrigation. Truly, the desert has been made to "blossom as the rose."

COLLECT ONE PELT

BY JIM KJELGAARD

Peter Bangoe, eleven days up the Mattawa River, felt that all his own special devils now lived in the murderous black eyes of his uncle, Cyrus Bangoe. Twenty tons of English-manufactured trade goods weighted down the five big thirty-five-foot birch-bark canoes, each of which carried a crew of twelve. Within a year they would return this way with furs obtained in the northwest. And if they didn't, Peter reflected with grim humor, the Bangoes would be a family of paupers. His father had borrowed heavily to outfit this brigade.

Standing as steersman in the stern of the rear canoe, Peter's six feet four inches towered four inches over the tallest of the little voyageurs. In this quiet water there was no need of close attention to the steering oar and his eye roved to Jean Nicolet, bowsman in the lead canoe and head guide. Jean had spent twenty years in the Northwest. When he was home he ranged the bush with Peter, who found bush-ranging much more to his taste than working in the family store at Montreal.

Cyrus Bangoe had traded for Peter's father ten years, since 1790, and for six of those years they had prospered. Two weeks ago Cyrus had returned to Montreal alone, the trade goods he had taken up the previous year lost. His voyageurs had deserted him, he explained, but he would take another brigade north this year. His father's cool answer was indelibly etched on Peter's brain.

"You shot ten voyageurs. That's why the rest deserted. You are taking no more of my canoes north. Peter's going this year."

Cyrus laughed, and left the store. But his cold eyes had said more than words could.

The lead canoe swerved close to the shore, and brought up in two feet of water. The other canoes drew up alongside and the voyageurs leaped out. Laughing and shouting, they began to unload. Peter waded ashore. Jean Nicolet came up to him, his white teeth flashing in a smile.

"Lac Nipissing an' French Riv-eer nex'," he said. "There the current go west an' we t'row away our poles."

The voyageurs adjusted portage collars, and little men who weighed a hundred and thirty-five or forty pounds lifted a ninety-pound sack into the collar, hoisted another to the top of it, and added a third. At a rapid dog trot they started over the well-marked portage trail to Lake Nipissing.

In repeated trips, always trotting, they piled the trade goods on the shore of the lake and returned for the canoes. Peter watched, his brow knit in a frown of concentration. Lake Nipissing, the French River, then out to Georgian Bay and the Sault Ste. Marie to Grand Portage—from there into the wilderness to establish a fort and trading post.

It all seemed so easy. It was *too* easy. Never once had he gone into the bush without something happening that shouldn't. But that

Peter had sworn to strangle Bangoe with his hands but the bearded voyageur pulled a knife as he leaped in!

had been his own fault. Never before had he tried to avoid trouble as he was trying now.

From the woods, a gun suddenly cracked. A little voyageur up to his knees in water dropped his pack and fell forward. Then came a volley of shots. More men fell. Others, with frightened yells, ducked for the shelter of the brush. Jean Nicolet, a long, thin-bladed knife in his hand, snarled and sprang toward the unseen riflemen.

Peter discharged his rifle, snatched up an ax and followed Jean. Something struck him bluntly on the head. He reeled, staggered backward, and sank down as the sun faded.

WHEN Peter awoke it was dark, and at first he thought the ebbing and flowing pound he heard was the sound of waves on the beach. But, when he raised his head, he knew that it was in his own brain. He retched violently, fell back to the ground, and lay a few minutes before getting up again. He raised a hand to his face and brought it down flecked with dried blood. A bullet had grazed his skin,

leaving it sore and tender. Ahead of him, Peter saw a pair of legs with the body hidden behind a tree. He crawled forward. It was Jean Nicolet.

Jean lay on his face. His right hand was stretched straight out, his left doubled under his body. His fingers were still closed so tightly about the hilt of his knife that Peter had to pry them open. He thrust the knife into his own belt.

He brought Jean's right arm down, and lifted his left one. Something fell from it to lie dully white on the needle-carpeted ground. Peter picked it up. It was an ivory button, cleverly shaped like a grinning wolf's head. The sight of it sent a spasm of insane fury ripping through Peter.

When Cyrus Bangoe had been in the store, Peter had noticed that his buckskin shirt was fastened with a row of such buttons! His uncle had ambushed the brigade! Peter tried to stand up and could not. He crawled down to the edge of the lake and fell asleep there.

The second time he awoke, the gray mists of early dawn hung over the lake and the forest. He sat up, startled, and looked out on the lake for the canoes. His glance found the death-contorted face of a small man whose heavy beard lent a grotesque expression to his features, and on the edge of the lake he saw the bobbing body of another man whose pack had fallen on top of him.

Peter rose to his feet, swaying weakly. At first he stumbled a little, and the sick feeling came back. But it passed. Six dead men lay about the portage. The rest had either fled into the woods, or had been able to get one of the canoes away and had escaped in it. Wherever they had gone they would be of no help. The devil's guns had spoken from the bush, and their comrades had fallen. They had escaped only because *le bon Dieu* was merciful.

Peter carried the dead men into the woods and scraped a shallow grave. One by one he placed the bodies in it, Jean Nicolet last. The bushy tail of a red fox dangled from Jean's gaudy sash. Peter stooped to cut it off before covering the grave.

When he had finished his grim task, he straightened, his face bleak. The trade goods in those canoes were his father's last wealth. His father had relied upon him to get them through safely. Jean Nicolet had been his best friend, and the six dead voyageurs had depended on him for protection.

Carrying the ax and the fox's tail, Jean Nicolet's thin knife and his own broad-bladed hunting knife in his belt, Peter turned west down the lake. He had no food, but that was the least of his worries. Only novices, pork eaters, could not live off the country.

He came to a little outjutting point of land where canoe birches were plentiful, and went down to the lake where he scraped and washed the dried blood from his face. Then he cut white cedars, and split the trunks and larger branches with his ax. Paring them down with his knife, he made a framework ten feet long, pointed at both ends, and two feet wide in the center. Next came the stripping of the bark from the birches and lashing it together with *wattape*, the fine root of the red cedar. The sewed strips of bark were lashed to the frame with more *wattape*, and the canoe was gummed with pitch.

Two days after he reached the point, Peter launched the crude ten-

foot canoe on Lake Nipissing and pointed it west.

FORTY days later, with Georgian Bay and the wild northern shore of Lake Superior behind him, Peter paddled the canoe into Grand Portage. Most of his clothing had been replaced by the skins of fawns which he had surprised in the water and killed with his thrown knife. His only decoration when he arrived at Grand Portage was the tail of a red fox dangling stiffly from his right shoulder.

Grand Portage swarmed with voyageurs, traders, Indians, and half-wild dogs. A crew of voyageurs, half drunk and gaudily arrayed in bright sashes and caps, sprawled near a brigade of ten canoes while three complacent Algonquin squaws stirred a kettle in which corn and pork was cooking. Peter beached his canoe a little beyond them, and turned it over with a stick propping one end.

He built a fire and prepared his meal, a small pike he had found swimming in shallow water and speared with a sharp stick. The voyageurs watched him curiously, and one strolled over to him.

"I am Jacques Laframboise," he announced politely. "I have paddled canoes from Montreal to Fort Kamloops, from Fort Enterprise to Athabasca. From where did you come in a canoe so small?"

Peter looked at him. "From Montreal."

The voyageur cocked his head. "Do you hope to trade with nothing but a knife, an ax, and the skin of a red fox?"

"I seek only one pelt," Peter informed him gravely.

"So! And is there a pelt of such richness that it would repay your long trip from Montreal?"

"Possibly." Peter took the wolf's head button from his pocket and held it in the palm of his hand. "Did you, in all your travels, ever meet one who wore such buttons?"

The voyageur regarded the button interestedly, clucked, and shook his head.

"But no. Had there been a man wearing such things, I most certainly should have seen him. They are not often worn." He filled a pipe and perched companionably close to Peter. "One sees strange things," he continued. "And not the least strange is a man who wears such things, or another who seeks him. Why do you wish to find this man?"

"He has the pelt I want."

The little voyageur clucked again, and looked at Peter uneasily. More than one man had gone mad in this country.

"I think I shall leave now," he said hastily.

Peter threaded his way through the canoes, past the warehouses, and stepped over piles of trade goods to the office of Duncan Campbell, the shrewd, gray-eyed Scot who commanded Grand Portage.

"Have many canoe brigades been ambushed?" Peter asked directly.

The trader looked at him with keen eyes. "Why do ye ask?"

"My name's Bangoe," Peter said. "The brigade I was bringing north was ambushed at Nipissing. Some men were killed.

"D'ye ken who did it?"

"Did you ever hear of Cyrus Bangoe?"

"Nae, laddie."

"I thought he'd change his name," Peter said. "He did it, and I aim to find him."

" 'Tis a mad quest, laddie," Campbell warned him. "I do nae mind tellin' ye there hae been other brigades lost. The mon who got them

is cunning in his ways, an' has never been seen. Ye canna find him. There is enough wild land north o' here to hide ten thousand such."

"I'm going to find him," Peter repeated doggedly.

The trader shrugged. "I canna help ye. It is part of my task to introduce law, order, and Christianity into this heathen land. But I can tell ye that there is in my employ here twenty voyageurs who last year lost their own brigade. Their leader is a mon named Baptiste LeClair, an' a very good marksman he is. They are free to leave any time they choose. Only, I charge ye to plot nothing illegal with LeClair an' his men, an do nae try to take the law in your own hands. If ye do such plotting, an' I find it out, I'll clap the lot of ye into jail."

THE days passed. Peter earned a few *livres* carrying trade goods over the nine-mile portage to Lac Mecane to start them on the way to Athabasca. He met every canoe that came in from Lake Superior, and every portage party that came over the nine miles. All had passed canoes, dozens of them, on every waterway, but was that not usual? No, no one had seen a man who closed his shirt with wolf head buttons.

As time went on, incoming voyageurs began to anticipate Peter's questions. Was he the man who sought a trader who closed his shirt with wolf-head buttons? Had he paddled a canoe from Montreal to get only one pelt? It was unbelievable! Marvelous!

Peter spent his spare time making snowshoes. At last the ice was on the edges of the water and Grand Portage was settling itself to the winter routine. Only its usual complement of sixty voyageurs, a few traders staying until the ice offered safe travel, and a few sick and injured remained.

Alone on the beach, Peter sat by his canoe, beside which, supported on a stick, was a birch-bark cup. He was finished. He had failed. As the trader had said, it was impossible to find one man in all that wilderness.

He arose to stir the pot in which he was cooking *rubbaboo*, pemmican boiled in water. A stick burst and sent a shower of bright sparks over the canoe. Peter leaped to kick them away.

As he moved, a long knife came whirling over the place where he had been sitting, to strike the canoe and hang quivering in its side.

Peter whirled. Twenty-five feet up the beach was a little, heavily bearded, long-haired man dressed in voyageur costume. Not realizing he was being watched, the little man was fumbling with a long rifle that seemed to be giving him trouble.

Peter leaped forward. The voyageur brought his clubbed rifle around, but swung too soon. Peter stepped back and in again to seize the rifle. He wrenched it free, and with his left hand held the little voyageur at arm's length while a rain of futile blows beat on his forearm and biceps.

"Stop!" Peter commanded at last. "Stop, or I'll tear the head from your body and feed it to the pike."

The little voyageur subsided, gasping. He looked at Peter with bewilderment in his eyes.

"I—" He hesitated. "I— No, you are not the man."

"What man?"

"The man on the Churchill River," the voyageur explained. "Ten canoes he had, loaded with trade goods, and a company of voyageurs going north. They were

campéd. Myself and five of my comrades, we had a canoe full of furs—enough to make us all rich. We camped beside them. Expecting peace, we were shot when we slept. Only I, Pierre LaRocque, escaped."

Peter gripped the little voyageur so tightly that he winced.

"This man, was his shirt closed with wolf-head buttons?"

"Oui," the little voyageur said sadly. "It was, in all save one place where a wolf's head was missing."

"Where did he go?"

"I think he must have gone to Lac La Deune. He has all my furs there. I am sorry that I tried to kill you with the knife, but I did not know that you were not the same man."

"Will you take me there?" Peter asked.

The voyageur shook his head vehemently. "Does one deliberately seek out the devil?"

"He's no devil! For all the furs he stole, and that many more, will you guide me to Lac La Deune?"

"That would be a great many furs," the little voyageur admitted. "But there are too many men for one to deal with."

"Three times the furs you lost," Peter promised recklessly. "And no harm to you. I promise."

The voyageur hesitated. "That is a great many furs—"

Peter retained his grip on the little man's arm. "You'll go," he said harshly. "I'll carry your rifle, powder, and shot. Have you a pair of snowshoes? Deep snow will overtake us before we get to Lac La Deune."

"But I have an old mother on the St. Laurent—"

"You'll go," Peter told him grimly. "The devil won't get you up there, but I'll certainly get you if you stay here."

He knelt by the fire, ostensibly for the purpose of packing his few belongings. But, unseen by the voyageur, he dropped the wolf-head button into the birch cup.

PETER and the little voyageur carried the canoe over the nine-mile portage and paddled from Lac Mecane to Rainy Lake. Ice overtook them there, and light snow. Plodding through it, they struck north along Lake Winnipeg.

In summer a much-traveled water, Lake Winnipeg was deserted in the winter except for the few who ran it with dog teams. Peter shot deer, moose, and caribou as they were needed, but they never carried more than enough meat for two days' camp. If a man with an ax and a knife could come from Lake Nipissing to Grand Portage and eat well all the way, a man with an ax and a rifle could go anywhere.

They crossed the River Aux Brochets on the ice and cut in below Norway House. From there they struck over the vast stretch of wilderness leading north to the Churchill River and Lac La Deune. The little voyageur had two blankets. Peter had none. He slept in a trench scooped in the snow, with a fire at each end and always with one hand on the rifle.

Pierre LaRocque became sullen when, five days from Lake Winnipeg, he ran out of tobacco. But he scraped some bark from a birch tree, crumbled it, and sang again when his pipe was loaded with that. Peter watched him. For a man going to meet the devil, his companion was extremely cheerful.

They went on, living on moose meat and venison and breaking the silence only by the soft whisper of their snowshoes on eight feet of snow. They crossed the Churchill

on ice, and struck into the mountains toward Lac La Deune. Fifty miles beyond the Churchill, for the first time in ten days, they crossed the track of a dog sledge. Peter pushed on eagerly, and camped that night in some spruces on the lee of a wind-swept ridge. Pierre LaRocque filled his pipe with bark.

"It is not far now to Lac La Deune," he said thoughtfully. "Do you know what you will do when you come there?"

"I know," Peter said quietly.

"There are many men."

"That is so. But if a bear fought a wolverene, he would win because he is stronger."

"Ah, but a wolverene is cunning."

"So is a bear. Sleep now."

Peter scooped a trench with a snowshoe, and laid a bed of spruce boughs in it. The little voyageur made his bed in another trench. Peter lay down, letting the heat from the fires warm his body. He dozed lightly, seeming to see in the shadows that the fires cast against the side of the trench the fiercely bristled face of Jean Nicolet, who had dared attack riflemen with a knife. He saw the others, six hardy little men who had died in his service. He saw the patient, understanding face of his father, who had depended on his son to take his last trade goods north.

He slept, to awake two hours later. The fires had died, but not enough so that it was uncomfortably cold. There seemed to be danger in the air, a lurking menace that he could not see or touch, but could only feel. He sat up, and jerked erect when he saw no glow from the fires the little voyageur had made. Pierre LaRocque had deserted him.

A shadowy figure flung itself from the top of the trench, strong arms twining about Peter's neck. He reached up, tore his assailant loose, and threw him into the snow. But more were coming. Peter kept his arms swinging. A man went down, to be trampled under milling feet. Peter grasped another and hurled him back over the top of the trench. Then a club thudded against the side of his head, send him staggering.

The mob piled over him. In a few minutes babiche thongs encircled his wrists, his snowshoes were strapped on, and a voice said:

"*Marche!*"

PETER'S ARMS had been bound behind him, and a man walking there kept hold of a short strip of babiche that had been left for the purpose. The others snowshoed beside and in front of him. The red-fox tail on Peter's right shoulder had not been taken from him.

The fort was only an hour away from where Peter had slept. It was the usual voyageur fort, a high stockade built of logs set upright and pointed on top. The storehouses, "shop," and bunkhouses were inside the stockade. All was dark save for a light shining through a window made of scraped deer skin.

Peter's captors guided him toward the light, and one opened the door of the house. They stacked their snowshoes along the wall. Peter stood coolly while one of the men stooped to unfasten his snowshoes. Then, with his hands still bound, he was pushed into the house.

His eyes sparkled with a savage light when he stopped in the center of the single room. The twelve voyageurs who had captured him were joined by six others and, with Pierre LaRocque strutting at their head, they withdrew to one side and stood silently. They were a hard-bitten lot. The rest of the fifty or

sixty men who had brought the canoes in and built the fort, simple voyageurs with no idea as to what really went on in the fort, and knew nothing of their master's character, were probably off trapping.

Peter looked around the room which was a big square twenty feet by twenty. Half of one side was a fireplace in which embers crackled and painted weird shadows on the wall. The other furniture consisted of a wooden table, a chair, a wall bunk, and, over the bunk, a rack of five long rifles. The one commanding these men needed plenty of rifles primed and ready.

After a bit another man came in. He was big, as tall as Peter. Heavily bearded, he wore a caribou cape and a high fur hat. He swept it off, set the rifle he carried in a corner, and stood with arms folded facing Peter. There was still the same cold light in his eyes—the eyes of a killer. Peter gave a grim laugh.

"We meet again, uncle. It's a long march to Montreal, and long back to Lake Nipissing."

"You come to stay, but I'm going back," Cyrus Bangoe mocked. "Did you really expect to find me by asking for a man who wore wolf-head buttons?"

"Yes," Peter said. "I knew that if I paraded around Grand Portage long enough, everybody would hear of the crazy man with a wolf-head button who came from Montreal to collect one pelt. They must be telling that story all the way from Astoria to York Factory by now. You were bound to hear it, and being the stinking wolverene you are, I knew it would scare you. You knew that I could describe you and tell all about how you ambushed my father's brigade at Nipissing. So you sent a man to bring me here."

The voyageurs were murmuring among themselves. Cyrus Bangoe's eyes were bright with rage.

"Talk!" he snapped. "You'll never talk again!"

"I knew it was your man," Peter said calmly. "He could have killed me with the knife, and there was nothing wrong with his rifle. So I understood then that you, knowing your men and not trusting them any farther than you can kick this stockade, had given him orders to bring me here so that you personally could attend to killing me. If you had told him to throw the knife straight, you would never know whether he did or only said he did, and I might show up at any time to strangle you with my bare hands."

Cyrus Bangoe snatched the long knife from his belt and held it before him, a choked oath bursting from his lips.

"I CAME anyway," Peter went on. "I pretended to believe the man you sent. I came so that I could show the voyageurs who work for you just what kind of rat you are, and to prove to them that if you did not always carry a rifle, you would not dare walk among them at all. In short, uncle, I think you are a windbag who could find employment with decent voyageurs by blowing their canoes along when the old woman of the wind fails them. Your men will now see how you kill a man with your knife—when that man is bound as I am. I assure all your men that, if I was not bound, I would show them how your own yellow blood could come spilling out of your hoggish throat."

One of the voyageur's laughed outright, and the laughter spread to the rest. They bent over, howling with mirth. A bound man should be begging for his life, not throwing insults

into the teeth of the one who intended to take that life. Cyrus Bangoe's eyes glowed coldly. There was no law this side of Grand Portage. He ruled his men by fear, and any of them would leap at a chance to take over the fort. If they should cease to be afraid of him, or be led to believe that he was afraid— Arrogantly, Bangoe motioned to a voyageur.

"Cut him loose!"

The voyageur came forward to slash the thongs binding Peter's wrists. He stepped out of the way and Peter stretched, his right hand dangling about the fox's tail.

Cyrus Bangoe's knife was in his hand. Held hip high, the eight-inch blade pointed outward. He took one step across the floor, two steps. The voyageur's excited gasps hissed above the soft sound of their shuffling feet. Peter balanced carelessly, leaning forward, his right hand still on the fox tail.

In a great leap Cyrus closed the distance between them. His right arm shot out. But Peter bent his long body to one side and the knife only grazed his shirt. His own right hand had torn the fox's tail loose and was driving it straight at Cyrus' heart. The voyageur's incredulous eyes followed as it struck. It buried itself deep and the fox tail curled back from the slim length of Jean Nicolet's long knife.

Breathing hard, Peter crouched over his fallen enemy—whose sins were now all atoned for. Then he straightened to look directly into the muzzle of a rifle that was in the hands of Pierre LaRocque. The little man's unblinking eyes stared unswerving into his.

"Ho!" exclaimed LaRocque. "You have saved me the trouble of killing that pig! You're very clever, friend, but not clever enough. *Marche!*"

The rifle boring into the small of his back, Peter walked out the door into murky daylight, followed by the grinning voyageurs. Outside, Pierre LaRocque stopped.

"Walk to the wall," he said crisply. "And turn around."

Peter took one step toward the stockade wall—two steps. Then suddenly the logs of the stockade themselves seemed to spit fire as rifles cracked. Pierre LaRocque and three others fell in their tracks. The rest milled aimlessly for a moment and stood with their hands over their heads. Fur-clad, moccasined little men plunged from the top of the stockade, to which they had climbed while Peter fought Cyrus, and surrounded the cowed crew. One figure detached itself from the mob and approached Peter. He swept his fur helmet back to reveal the smiling, fiercely mustached face of Baptiste LeClair.

"As we agreed, I brought my men when I found the wolf's-head button in the birch cup," LeClair said. "We stayed six hours behind you, but came right on when we found where they had taken you."

Peter grinned. "You came at just the right time. The fort is ours, and there's more than plenty in it for both of us. We will stay here and trade this winter, and with spring we'll take back to Montreal the richest load of furs that's ever come in there. Both of us will be rich, Baptiste."

For one brief second Peter stared at the stockade. It was just a wall of logs, but for a bit he thought he had seen in it a shallow grave on Lake Nipissing where seven brave little men of the Northwest could now rest at peace because their ruthless murders had been avenged.

THE END.

BUNKHOUSE CHRISTMAS

BY S. OMAR BARKER

'Twas Christmas Eve out on the ranch, an' all the winter crew
Was settin' 'round the bunkhouse fire with nothin' else to do
But let their fancies wander on the thoughts of Christmas chuck,
An' what they'd like the best to eat if jest they had the luck
To set down to a table where the feast was laid so thick
That all they'd have to do was reach to take their choice an' pick.

Young Sleepy Kid, the wrangler, claims he'd love a stummick-ache
From stuffin' steady half a day on choclit-frosted cake.
"A slab of turkey breast," smacks Pete, "an' good ol' punkin pie!"
"I'd reach fer oyster dressin'!" Lobo Luther heaves a sigh,
"It ain't no Christmas feed for me," says little Charlie Moss,
"Without brown chicken gravy an' some red cranberry sauce!"
"Mince pie!" avers ol' Swaller-fork. "The kind my ma could make.
It beats your punkin forty ways—an' also choclit cake!"

So each they named their fancy, till our chops begun to drip,
Then ol' Pop Williams give a snort an' eased his crippled hip
By hitchin' to the window an' a-sizin' up the night.
"Well, boys," he says, "it's Christmas Eve, an' if I figger right,
That snow's too deep fer travel—so before I hit the hay,
Upon the subject now in hand I'll kinda have my say:
It ain't what's in your stummick that's the most important part—
It's the feelin's of your gizzard, or in other words, your heart.

A-doin' others kindness is the road to Christmas cheer,
But that, o' course, ain't possible, the way we're snowbound here.
It looks like all that we can do for our good Christmas deed
Is hustle all the livestock in an' give 'em extry feed.
To hungry cows an extry fork of hay will seem as nice
As when a hungry puncher finds a raisin in his rice.
An' as for fav'rite Christmas chuck, I'll name mine now, to wit:
It's beef an' beans an' biskits—*'cause I know that's what we'll git!*"

Quest headed out on a trail of death with the wounded Pelt at his mercy.

HANG NOOSE FOR ONE

BY GUNNISON STEELE

JARD QUEST stood before his shack, huddled where the gaunt brown hills merged with the desert, and watched the tiny moving speck out there in the flats. At first, with the setting sun in his eyes, he hadn't been sure. But now he knew; it was a man.

Obviously, the man was hurt, or thirsty. He was reeling crazily. More than once he fell. But he always got doggedly to his feet and staggered on, weaving like a drunken man. Quest grimaced, but didn't move from his watching position.

Jard Quest was a powerful man, red-haired, with gray, hawkish features. Under his left eye was a small, crescent-shaped scar. Nobody here in the Blackroot country knew much about him. Only a few prospectors knew that, a year ago, he'd moved into this old deserted cabin on the desert edge, digging for gold in summer and running a trapline in winter up in the hills. The general opinion was that he was honest, but surly and unsociable.

Quest stirred suddenly. The man

out on the flats had fallen again. He tried to get up, and failed. But he didn't stop. He crawled forward, doggedly, on hands and knees, his head almost touching the hot sand. Quest grimaced again. A man had to want to live mighty bad, to do that.

But now, finally, the crawling man had stopped. Apparently he had reached the limit of his endurance, for he sprawled out on the sand and lay still.

As if he'd been waiting for that, the prospector left the shack and strode across the alkali flat. He stooped, turned the man on his back, and stood looking appraisingly down at him. The man was unconscious. He was hatless, and he didn't have any gun. He was about Quest's size, with hair only a little darker, and it was clear that he was half dead from thirst. His lips were swollen and cracked, and his face was blistered. One trouser leg was blood-soaked.

A quick examination showed a bullet hole just above the knee. The wound was red and inflamed, and Quest knew that the bullet was still in the leg.

But it was the scar under the man's left eye that riveted the prospector's gaze. Shaped like a half-moon, it was a little larger than the one on Quest's own face. Queer, he thought, two scars so similar, and in almost the same spot.

The man's legs twitched as though he were trying to walk, but he didn't open his eyes. He croaked harshly, "Thirsty . . . and this hellish pain. Got to keep walkin' . . . got to—"

QUEST'S face was expressionless as he lifted the wounded man easily in his arms and strode back toward the cabin. He placed the man on a bunk, then went to a tiny spring behind the shack and returned with a pail of cold water. He bathed the man's pain-lined face and forced some of the water between the swollen lips. The man stirred, moaning softly, but didn't open his eyes.

Quest heated water, bathed and bandaged the wound. That was all he could do. The wounded leg needed quick, expert attention, but the nearest doctor was in the desert town of Bearpaw, thirty miles across the desert.

By now it was dark, and Quest lighted a smelly lamp and sat down beside the bunk. The man was a stranger to him, but then he knew few people in this part of the country.

A continual mutter of delirious words care from the wounded man. "Shot me, the damned dog . . . but I'll get . . . him!" he whispered.

Quest moved restlessly, staring at that crescent-shaped scar on the man's cheek. He realized suddenly that the man's eyes were open, and were fastened on him. There was a wary, guilty look on the man's face, as if he realized that he had been talking. Then a mask of bewilderment seemed to cover the guilt.

"I . . . how'd I get here?" he asked weakly.

"I brought you," explained Quest. "You fell, out on the desert. You were in a bad way, afoot, with a bullet hole in your leg. Now do you remember?"

The man nodded, grimacing with pain. "He shot me, blast him, without givin' me a chance."

"Who shot you?" Quest asked softly.

"Why, the gent that was with me. That was two days ago. Then that hellish trek across the desert, fighting the wind and sand and heat; me

with a wounded leg, and without water. Seemed like I'd been walkin' for weeks before I saw your cabin."

"And the man with you," Quest probed. "What happened to him?"

The wounded man stared at him warily. "He died out there in the desert. The wind and sand and heat —it was too much for him. When he fell, I left him and came on alone. What else could I do? Anyway, it was all his fault. He was a damned—" He paused, as if realizing that he was talking too much. "I'm thirsty. You got any water?"

"Plenty," Quest nodded. "But first, what's your name?"

The man shook his head jerkily. "I don't aim to tell you any more. You feed me, mister, and take care of me till I can walk, and I'll pay you. I . . . I can get money."

Quest got the bucket of water and placed it on a table where the man could see it, but didn't offer to give him any.

"Tell me the rest of it," he said softly.

"There's nothing more to tell," the man said sullenly.

"Your name, and the name of the gent that was with you," Quest insisted. "Look, mister. My name's Jard Quest, and I live off here alone. You're the first man I've seen in six months. Mebbe I've got a reason for being here. Mebbe, if you told me what happened I'd help you."

The wounded man shook his head stubbornly. "I don't trust you—I don't trust anybody. No, I won't tell you anything."

Quest shrugged. "That suits me," he said, turning away. "But it don't leave me much choice."

Quick alarm leaped to the man's eyes. "What do you mean by that remark?"

"Why, there was that other gent—the one you killed."

"I didn't kill him! Like I said, he died out there in the desert. He couldn't stand the heat and wind and thirst."

Quest grinned, coldly, mockingly. "You're lying, and I know it. You killed him. The way I figure it, he was a lawman, carrying you out to a hang noose. That being the case, it'd be my plain duty to take you to the nearest town and turn you over to the law, wouldn't it?"

The man cursed fiercely, raising himself on an elbow. "Blast you, I'll—" Then, as if he realized his helplessness, he said pleadingly, "I—You wouldn't do that!"

"Wouldn't I? Go on, talk. You can trust me. Mebbe I've done things I wouldn't want generally known. What's your name?"

THE man stared at Quest, a look of uncertainty in his tortured eyes. Then, as if he had suddenly made up his mind, he blurted, "My name's Bill Pelt. The gent who died out there in the desert was Johnny Keel, a deputy sheriff in Bearpaw under old Mulehide Carmody. Three days ago this Johnny Keel comes to my shack up on the northern edge of Big Windy, and says he aims to arrest me for murder. I put up a fight, but he shot me, damn him, before I knew what it was all about."

"Who did he accuse you of murdering?" asked the prospector, his eyes fixed on Pelt's face.

"It happened, it seems, about two years ago, down in Texas. A bank was robbed, and the cashier killed. A gent named Jack Brule pulled the job. He got away, but he was identified. He was a big hombre, about my size, or yours, and he had a scar,

shaped like a half-moon, under his left eye.

"Like the one under your eye?" Quest asked softly.

The man who had called himself Bill Pelt, cursed. "That's just it. This scar was what this deputy sheriff was goin' by. But I'm innocent—I don't know anything about that robbery and killin' down in Texas. I got this scar when I was a kid. A bronc threw me against a corral post. I know you won't believe me, but it's the truth!"

"Why shouldn't I believe you? I've got a scar like that, too, but it don't mean I'm a murderer. What happened, after this Johnny Keel shot you?"

"Why, Keel started back for Bearpaw with me. It didn't matter that I was shot, and that we didn't have any water. I couldn't convince him I was innocent. He had a horse. Even though I was hurt, he rode and made me walk. But after a while the horse fell on a gulch side and broke its leg, then we both were afoot. I'm tellin' you I'll never forget that trek—the sand and wind and heat! We got lost, and I couldn't go fast. Keel would have gone off and left me, if I hadn't convinced him I knew the way out. But the desert got him. Sometime this mornin', he just stopped and laid down and died. Then I came on alone, and here I am. And that's all there is to it."

"Not quite," said Quest. "There's that wounded leg of yours. No use beatin' about the bush, Pelt. That leg needs attention, and unless it gets it pretty quick, gangrene or blood poisoning is liable to set in. You know what that'd mean."

"What do you aim to do?"

"I aim to get you to Bearpaw, to a sawbones, just as quick as I can. That bullet's got to come out."

"But Bearpaw's where this Deputy Sheriff Keel was located," Pelt protested. "And there's still the sheriff, Mulehide Carmody. He might start askin' questions."

"He won't see us," Quest said reassuringly. "I'll tell the sawbones you accidentally shot yourself. You stop worrying now; I'll take care of you."

Pelt stared hard at him. "If I thought you—" Then, as if realizing his helplessness, he nodded. "I . . . I hope you're on the square, Quest. And I reckon Bearpaw's the best bet."

QUEST had a horse, and at dawn he loaded the wounded man onto it, and they headed for the town of Bearpaw, which lay straight

across the Big Windy, thirty miles away.

The jolting must have hurt Bill Pelt's wounded leg, but he didn't complain. He rode humped over in the saddle, seemingly only half-conscious. More than once, though, Quest caught Pelt's eyes on him in a suspicious stare. But the prospector strode on ahead of the horse, tirelessly, his lips curled in a grim, sardonic smile. The wounded man, he knew, was wholly at his mercy.

The sun beat down fiercely, and the wind blew in scorching gusts across the basin, bringing waves of yellow sand. The prospector and the wounded man traveled slowly, stopping often for rest. Pelt's wounded leg had swollen tight in his boot. At times he was only half-conscious, and Quest smiled grimly as he listened to his delirious babbling.

Purple shadows of night caught them a mile out on the desert from Bearpaw. Blobs of yellow light speared from doorways and windows as they went along the rutted street. Quest stopped before a lighted, false-fronted building from which floated sounds of revelry.

"I've got to find out where the sawbones lives," he said. "Won't take but a minute. You just sit tight."

Pelt said nothing, and Quest went into the saloon. His cold eyes probed quickly about the noisy, dimly lighted room. A piano blared tinny music, and roughly dressed men whirled short-skirted honkatonk girls about the room. The prospector threaded his way to the bar. He ordered whiskey, and downed the liquid in a quick gulp.

Then he asked the fat barkeep, "Mulehide Carmody, the sheriff—where can I find him?"

"Likely at his place, on the edge of town," the man answered. "Little white bungalow, with vines on the gate—you can't miss it. What sort of business you got with him?"

"That's my business," said Quest. He left the saloon and went back to Pelt.

"We'll have you fixed up in a jiffy," he told the wounded man. He led the horse on along the street, past rows of drab shacks, pausing finally before a white bungalow with vines on the gate. Pelt stirred in the saddle.

"You're sure this is the doc's place?"

Quest laughed softly. "Stop worryin', man," he said.

A light glowed in a front room of the bungalow. Through a window they could see a paunchy, round-faced little man, sitting with feet upthrust on a scarred desk and reading a newspaper. A belt and holstered gun dangled from the back of the chair he sat in.

QUEST helped Pelt from the saddle and along the walk to the bungalow. The door was open, and they went into the lighted room.

The paunchy oldster's boots thudded against the floor as he reared to his feet.

"By gonnies, what's happenin' here?" he demanded brusquely.

Suspicion had leaped to Bill Pelt's eyes. "Hell, Quest, that don't look like a sawbones to me," he growled. "He's got a badge—"

Quest laughed. "Sure, he's got a badge," he said softly. "A sheriff's supposed to have a badge, ain't he?"

Mulehide Carmody's longhorn mustaches bristled. "Dagnab it, you aim to tell me what's comin' off here?"

"I've got a boarder for you, sheriff," Quest explained. "His name's Jack Brule, and he's wanted in Texas for robbery and murder. I'm hereby claimin' any bounty money that might—"

"Quest, you damn skunk, you double-crossed me!" the wounded man snarled. With a desperate, lunging leap, he flung himself across the room, toward the chair that held the gunbelt.

The sudden move caught the prospector unprepared. With a curse, he grabbed for his own gun. The weapon came up with a coughing roar, its muzzle blossoming redly.

Bill Pelt's wounded knee crumpled under him, flinging him to the floor, and that saved his life. Lightning-fast, he snaked the gun from its holster. He fired from the floor, calmly, deliberately, his weight propped on one elbow.

The close-range bullet caught Quest in the shoulder, smashing him back against the wall and knocking his gun to the floor. He cowered there, a dazed, unbelieving light in his eyes.

The sheriff snatched the gun from Bill Pelt's hand, glaring truculently from him to Quest.

"Johnny, you skinny-shanked hellion," he fumed, "you better explain what all this's about, 'fore I wrap this six-shooter over yore skull!"

The man with the wounded leg grinned tiredly. "Sure, I'll explain. And that gent over there looks sort of puzzled—mebbe he'd like to hear it, too. You see, Quest, my name's not Bill Pelt. It's Johnny Keel, and I'm a deputy sheriff. I had to sort o' lie to you, to keep you from killin' me. Because I knew, from the first minute I saw you, that your name was really Jack Brule, an' that you was wanted in Texas for murder and robbery."

"How—how'd you know that?" Quest asked dazedly.

"From a reward flyer I'd seen with your picture on it. My stumblin' out of the desert to your shack was just an accident. I'd been up on the desert edge after a gent who was wanted for a killin' here in Bearpaw a month ago. There was a gun ruckus, and we both got shot up some. This killer was hurt worse than I was. He died out on the desert, and I left him and went on alone. That much of the tale I told you was true, anyway.

"Like I said, I recognized you, and I knew that if you found out I was a deputy sheriff you'd kill me. So I made up that story I told, hopin' you'd take the bait. And you did. I'm about your size, we both have red hair, an' scars under our left eyes. So you decided to bring me out and turn me over to the law, and tell them I was Jack Brule. This scar under my eye would send me to the gallows. Then you, the real Jack Brule, would be officially dead. You'd be free."

The killer seemed groggy, unable to believe what he'd heard. "But—what about that scar under your eye?" he whimpered.

Deputy Johnny Keel dropped wearily into a chair and looked at Sheriff Carmody. "Mulehide, where did I get this scar under my eye?" he asked.

"Why, you got it when you was a kid," said the old sheriff. "A bronc throwed you against a corral post. I saw it happen myself. Just a little thing, that scar—but seems like it helped build a hang noose for a skunk!"

THE END.

Santa Claus IN CHAPS

BY FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

CHAPTER I

A LONG-EARED REINDEER

"IRON JOHN HARDY and his hard-bitten sons may not like it," Matt Hardy told himself as he threw a diamond hitch over the packs of presents, "but I'm taking Christmas to them this year." He made the load secure, then prodded the mule into action. "Get going, you long-eared reindeer; there's tough trail ahead, and we want to make Slash H by bedtime."

Iron John Hardy had fought Indians, white men, rustlers and nature to establish the Slash H. The spread had prospered, but during the past ten years a range war had developed between the Hardys and Suttons, who owned the only rival ranch in the region. Each believed that the government range in Emigrant Valley was vital to their very

It came hard for Iron John Hardy and his sons to sing Christmas carols —the word "peace" was not in their vocabulary.

existence, and sooner or later there was going to be a finish fight over it.

Iron John's way of life had taught him sentiment softened a man. He held that a soft man was doomed to defeat. His wife, Kate, had different ideas.

Kate Hardy had been born and raised in New England, and when she came West she brought with her the New England love of Christmas. She liked to make presents, hang stockings and sing carols. And because the emotions aroused by Christmas festivities were so deep and satisfying, she had always tried to soften her iron husband this one week of the year. She had little success.

"Christmas is fine for kids," Iron John admitted, "up to a certain point. But it mellows a man, and that's bad. What'd Sharon Sutton think if he heard I believed in Santa Claus and sung songs? I know what he'd think. That I'd gone soft."

When the Hardys' eldest son, Steve, was seven, the "Christmas nonsense" ended. Iron John couldn't stop his wife from giving presents and singing carols, but he could explain to Steve that while Christmas was all right for women and

little children, men had no time for such things.

When Bart reached the ripe age of seven, he was also taken in hand. Kate Hardy said little as the two older boys grew, but she watched, with misgivings, as they changed from light-hearted, normal boys to grim and at times sullen young men.

"You don't like it," Iron John once said. "But this ranch is for you and the boys, and we've got to keep it. If somethin' happens to me, then Steve's got to be ready to take charge. If the Suttons get Steve, then Bart must be ready to match gun with gun. And if they get Bart, then there's Matt."

"No, John," Kate had said quietly, "there won't be Matt the way you think. I haven't lifted a hand in your raising of Steve and Bart, but Matt is going to be trained differently. There's an answer to this range war. We're too close to it to know what that answer is, but it's there. So I'm taking Matt away from all this when he's sixteen."

"And what do you hope to gain?" asked Iron John.

"A practical cattleman," she replied, "who will know every angle of the business, and who will return with an answer to all this feuding. How can either the Suttons or Hardys hope to make the most of their range and cattle when they waste so much time gunning for each other?"

Because Iron John was a fair man and because he had had his way with Steve and Bart, he raised no objections when his wife began packing her own and Matt's clothes on the boy's sixteenth birthday. "I'll send you money, regular," was all he said. He had kept his promise, and had been more than generous, even in the lean years when the price of beef was low.

And now, five years later, Matt was returning to the home ranch, bringing a mule load of Christmas presents, many of which had been made by his mother's hands.

As Matt rode along, breaking trail over the snow-choked Ambush Creek road, he reviewed his boyhood. Each time the swirling curtain of snow lifted, his eyes eagerly searched the canyon for familiar landmarks.

He saw ledges he had crawled over on deer hunts; the bench where grouse gathered in the fall; and the crag that held an eagle's nest. But he didn't see the lone figure sighting along a rifle barrel high above.

Feathery snow swirled as the rifle cracked. The bullet droned ten feet ahead of Matt Hardy, and struck a rock. Shattered fragments struck the horse's shoulder. The animal reared, staggered backward, and struggled to regain its balance. The snow on the edge of the road settled under the weight, pitching the horse over the brink.

Matt leaped clear in time to escape the animal's rolling body. He rolled several yards, then slid slowly to the creek bottom. He was seething with rage. The hate his mother had tried to smother the last five years almost flared. He shot a glance upward, then noticed that a projecting ledge made it impossible for a second shot to reach the creek bottom. His first impulse was to climb the mountain and have it out with his attacker. His second was to do something for his horse hopelessly caught in a snowdrift.

He secured the threshing legs, then, with the aid of a slab of bark, began clearing away the snow. It was an hour before he got the horse out. The animal was unhurt, the saddle undamaged. Matt

worked his way slowly along the creek bottom some two miles before he found a point leading to the road. With much pushing and heaving he got the horse onto the road once more.

It was snowing hard now and blowing. This protected him from his attacker, but it also covered up tracks as fast as they were made.

"That blasted mule must be somewhere ahead," Matt growled. "It'd be a shame if it wandered off with the Christmas presents. Still, a mule's no fool. That one has been in this country before. It acted as if it knew where it was going."

The horse broke trail all the way to Ambush Pass. Here the country flattened out and became rolling rangeland. Ambush Creek continued on to Emigrant Valley, passing through Emigrant Gap. Matt gave up his attempt to locate the mule; there was nothing to go by. "I'll do well if I don't get lost myself," he reflected.

He followed the creek some distance, then turned directly into the storm, and with the wind to guide him rode until he reached Slash H barbed wire. He followed this to a gate, and presently found himself on a narrow road. It was badly drifted, but wire on each side kept him from losing his way.

Matt was almost in the back yard when he saw the kitchen-window light. He rode on to the barn, unsaddled, rubbed down and fed his horse. Then he hurried up to the house. Ah Sing, the Chinese cook, stared at him incredulously, then his aged parchment face wrinkled into a grin.

"Young boss come back!" he exclaimed. "Where lady boss? Her outside? 'Flaid come in?"

"No, mom isn't outside, Sing," Matt answered. "But if things go right she'll be here for Christmas. Where're dad and the boys."

"Old boss try catch Sutton. Maybe catch old Sharon." Ah Sing shook his head. "Plenty trouble. All time bang bang. Fight! Fight! No good! You hungry." He didn't wait for an answer, but stirred up the fire.

Matt went to his old room, looked around, and sighed with satisfaction. There on the wall was his first .30-30 —a Christmas present. Nearby was his trout rod, which had also been a present. He grinned at the worn possessions of early boyhood—a small, battered saddle, an air gun with a broken stock, squirrel traps and a bear rug he had tanned so poorly much of the fur had fallen out. But that had been his first bear, and to him there was no finer rug in the world.

BEFORE Matt realized it, Ah Sing was calling him to eat. He was half through his meal when a stamping of feet announced the arrival of the other Hardys. The three big men came into the kitchen, melting snow dripping from their hats and clothes quickly in the warmth. At first they did not see Matt.

"Sing, we're hungrier'n a she-wolf with pups," Iron John Hardy said. "Rustle us some grub. Oh, hello, Matt!"

The habitually stern expression on Iron John's face gave way to a flash of pleasure, then he became grave again. "Hello, Matt. I'm glad you're back. You're lookin' fine." He paused, then said a little uncertainly: "How's your mother?"

"Fine." Matt turned to his brothers, who were studying him intently. "I'm sure glad to see all of you."

"We ain't been any place else the last five years," Steve remarked

dryly. "And there ain't been no fences around you."

Matt remembered now that his oldest brother had always had the stinging tongue of the family. Steve was handsome, but his face was as hard and unyielding as granite.

"I've been here and there," Matt answered. Steve's handshake was perfunctory. He was taking nothing for granted.

Bart wasn't unfriendly, but it was apparent that he, too, was reserving judgment on this young brother who had stayed away from home for five years. He shook hands and said: "Howdy. You've put on inches and weight."

After supper Iron John turned to his youngest son. "Hit the high spots, Matt, and tell us what you've been doing. We can go into details later. Me and the boys want to be in bed by midnight. At five o'clock we're leaving to clean out the Sut-

tons. By tomorrow night there won't be one left in the high country."

"So the range war's come to a head at last?" Matt said.

"Yes. They drove our cattle into Emigrant Valley and froze 'em in." Iron John's face wore a look of repressed fury. "You know how it'll be. We can't get feed to 'em. Snow's too deep to drive 'em out. Frozen meat this winter, buzzard feed next spring."

They were all watching Matt, searching for his reactions to a trick that would smash the family fortunes.

"Don't it get your mad up?" Steve demanded hotly.

"I'm having a hard time to keep it down," Matt admitted.

"Why try?" demanded Steve.

"Because a hotheaded man loses more fights than he wins," Matt declared. "I lost a couple before I found that out."

"Go ahead, Matt," Iron John urged. "Tell us about yourself. I got you side-tracked, but I wanted you to know what's going on."

Matt realized he must choose his words carefully and make his actions understood. At no point could he let Iron John feel that anything his wife had done was in criticism of his own methods.

"When we left," Matt said slowly, "mother had a long talk with me."

There was a disapproving silence.

"She felt the pioneering work had been done in the high country, and the next step was to get the most out of it," he continued. "She wanted me to find out how we could produce more and better cattle. She wanted to know what happened to cattle after they were aboard the cars, which type arrived in the best condition, and why."

"She always was one to go into things," Iron John said quietly. "She brought a line of reasonin' from New England I never understood. It didn't seem to have any place here."

"Mom was a square peg in a round hole," declared Steve.

"They didn't come any better," Iron John said, as if to silence possible criticism. "Go on, Matt."

"TO make a long story short," Matt said, "I had a couple of years in an agriculture college. Studied soils, stock breeding and so on. Then I put in a summer in the Chicago stock yards. I wanted to see how the different brands of cattle stood the long haul."

"Did you see any Slash H?" Bart asked eagerly.

"Yes, and Circle S from the Sutton spread, too," Matt answered. "They weren't as heavy as the average."

"That don't make sense," Steve roared. "Our cattle—"

"I'm not arguing whether it makes sense or not, Steve," Matt said bluntly; "I'm giving you facts."

"What's the answer?" Iron John asked.

"The Suttons and Hardys sitting down to the same table and working out something," Matt answered.

The iron in the rancher's character came to the surface then. "I'd see Slash H in hell before I'd set down to the same table with Sharon Sutton."

"Then you're going to keep running around in circles," Matt said. "Here's a plan I worked out. It—"

"I don't want to hear it," Iron John said flatly. His voice carried a warning, but Matt chose to disregard it.

"If you're wise, you'll listen," he began.

"Wait!" Iron John's eyes narrowed. "I'll make a deal with you. I'll listen, if you'll throw in with us and wipe out the Suttons."

"I'll help you get your cattle out of Emigrant Valley," Matt agreed. "And if the Suttons get in the way, it'll be tough for one side or the other. I'm not interested in killing Suttons. What I'm interested in is doubling the number of Slash H beef."

"You know them critters up in Emigrant Valley are done for," Steve said grimly.

Matt studied him a minute before he spoke. "You know, Steve, it's hard to imagine you saying a thing can't be done."

Steve leaped to his feet, his face black with fury. "All right! I'll follow you into Emigrant Valley and out again, if you'll follow me to the Suttons' front door. And it won't be to hang no Christmas wreath on it, either. . . . Wait, by thunder, I *will* hang a wreath on their door."

"One thing at a time," Matt said. "Now, if you'll listen to my proposition, I'll go along in a fight with the Suttons. First we go to Emigrant Valley and make a try at getting the cattle out. That's my end of it. When we've won or lost there, we pick up your end of it, and I'll string along with you."

"That's a fair proposition," Iron John agreed. "We'll shake on it."

They shook hands all around, then Matt said: "Each spring a chinook wind brings a warm rain with it. The snow goes off the mountains around Emigrant Valley in a few days' time. Water roars through Emigrant Gap, Ambush Creek runs bank full across our range, thunders through Ambush Pass and on to the flat country, where it wastes itself in a big sink. My idea is for the Suttons and Hardys to throw a dirt dam across the gap—"

"They wouldn't do it," Iron John interrupted. "Water would back up and flood several thousand of their best Emigrant Valley grazin' land. Besides, it'd cover the open range we both use and are fightin' over."

Matt nodded. Each outfit used their lower range as long as it lasted, then moved into Emigrant Valley in summer and grazed there until early

winter. When snow began to fly they moved their herds to the lower country again. Whichever outfit completely controlled Emigrant Valley would, in time, drive the other out of the region.

This year, taking advantage of an early snowfall, the Suttons had driven their cattle from the valley, then opened fire on the Slash H punchers and kept them off until the snow blocked the gap.

"Turn Emigrant Valley into a lake," Matt said; "build ditches to the lower range, irrigate all summer long, and you'll double your present grass supply even with the Emigrant Valley range out of it. It'll take time, and both outfits will have to reduce their herds until the plan is working, but five years from now you'll be out in front. Your cattle will leave here in better shape, and bring more money in Chicago."

"Sounds good," Iron John conceded. "We might do it if we owned the whole country, but we couldn't trust the Suttons. They ain't human bein's like us."

"I'm in favor of wipin' 'em out," said Steve, "and then carryin' out Matt's plan."

Matt could see there was no use arguing with them. He said good night and left them to talk it out. As he disappeared up the stairs, Iron John, Steve and Bart exchanged questioning glances.

"He ain't one of us no more," Steve declared. "I figger we should sneak out bright and early and let him sleep. He won't be no good in a fight agin' the Suttons. He ain't had the right kind of raisin'."

"But we agreed to back his hand in the valley," Iron John reminded his son. "So we'll go through with it. If he's soft, we'll find it out up there."

CHAPTER II

A SUTTON ON GUARD

NEXT morning Matt got up a few minutes ahead of his father and brothers to have a few words in private with Ah Sing.

"Here's the play, Ah Sing," he said. "Mom had planned a special kind of Christmas up here, but the presents she sent are on the back of a fool mule that's wandering all over the country. You go out and find the critter if you can. I'd hoped it would show up here. It seemed to know the country."

"Sing look see," the cook promised.

"Here was the plan: If I didn't join mom in the flat country in a few days, she'd know everything was all set for the celebration and would come up. Now it looks as if I'm moving into a range war. Will you ride down to Coulee City and tell her to stay there until she hears from me? It's a long, tough ride, but we can't have her coming up here and maybe finding her family shot to bits."

"Sure," Ah Sing said. "Me go. Sing burn paper. Mebbe everything fine. Mebbe Santa Claus come. You savvy Sing burn paper?"

"Sure," Matt answered. "I remember you've always burned paper when people were sick or in trouble. It keeps the evil spirits away."

Iron John came down a few minutes later, followed by Steve and Bart. They ate breakfast, and saddled, and were joined by the half dozen punchers who worked on the Slash H. They were a tough, hard-riding lot.

"What you got there, Steve?" one of them asked as Steve lashed a package to his saddle.

"Christmas wreath for the Suttons," Steve explained. "I'll show

it to you." He unrolled a grain sack and displayed a circular object made of barbed wire and bullets. "It's the kind of wreath they'll understand. Different than the one the kid brother, there, would give 'em." He nodded toward Matt.

"What's eating Steve?" Matt asked Bart in a low voice. "He goes out of his way to make dirty cracks at me."

Bart shrugged. "Steve's hisself, that's all. Just naturally mean and tough. He's been worse the last few weeks. Girl trouble."

"Steve in love?" Matt asked.

"Yeah. With Annie Gehagen. Remember her, Matt?"

"Do you mean that little redheaded spitfire that used to go with us to the Forks school?" Matt asked.

Bart nodded. "She was stuck on Steve even back in them days. Followed him around wherever he went. It used to get his goat. Now it's the other way around. Steve's crazy about her. The upshot of it was, he pops the question."

"Figured to marry and have more time to fight?" suggested Matt.

"I suppose that was the idear," Bart agreed. "But all of a sudden she didn't want him. He can't understand it. Neither can I. Wimminfolks sure are queer." The two rode in silence for several yards, then Bart said: "You knocked around in the flat country quite a spell, Matt. You must've got to know plenty of girls. Mebbe done a little sparkin' now and again."

"Some," Matt admitted. "I'm no authority on them, though."

"But you know more'n Steve does," Bart insisted.

A half hour later he was riding with Steve. "I was talking to Matt," he told his brother. "He wouldn't say much, but he's been runnin' wild with the girls. I got a idear he can tell you why that little redhead o' yourn has took the bit in her teeth. Don't forget, Steve, we've got to get used to the fact Matt's growed up. He ain't a kid no more."

Steve glared at him. "I ain't leanin' on that squirt yet, in love or anything else," he said flatly.

A LOW ridge splitting the rolling hills marked the boundary line between the Slash H and Circle S spreads. A heavy barbed-wire fence followed the boundary. The ridge led to Emigrant Gap. Ambush Creek, which flowed through the gap followed a course on the Hardy side of the ridge. The deep canyon that constituted the gap was government range. The Suttons' portion of Emigrant Valley was on the easterly side of the stream. A cattle trail, closed in the winter, ran over the rim, and dropped sharply into Blue Grass Valley, the home ranch of Circle S.

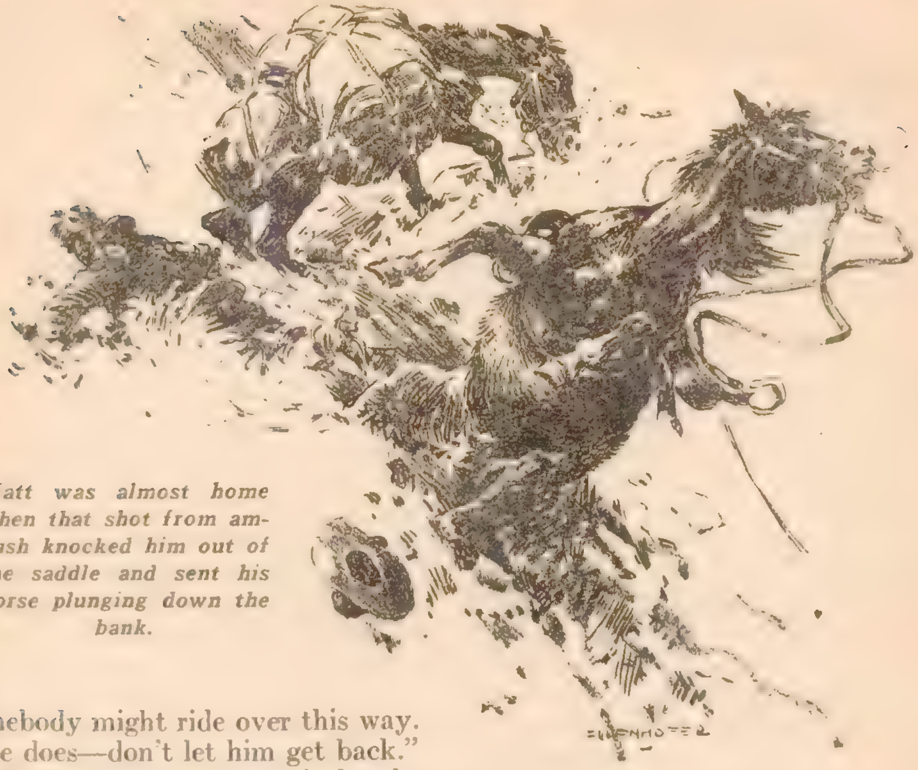
Thus, when winter came early, it had not only been easy for the Suttons to drive their cattle over the Rim Trail, as it was called, to the home ranch, but using the trail enabled them to send men quickly to the gap and drive off the Slash H riders. The snow, filling in the gap, had done the rest.

It was late afternoon when the Slash H party stopped a mile from the gap. The horses were wallowing through belly-deep drifts.

"You fellows stay here," Iron John told the men, "and us Hardys will go the rest of the way by snowshoe. Make camp, and send a man to the top of the ridge to make sure no Suttons are fixin' to dry-gulch us."

"It ain't likely," one of the punchers said. "They'd never guess in a thousand years you'd come up here."

"Men get hunches," Iron John said. "Keep watch on that ridge.



Matt was almost home when that shot from ambush knocked him out of the saddle and sent his horse plunging down the bank.

Somebody might ride over this way. If he does—don't let him get back."

The brothers took turns in breaking trail through the deep snow that blocked the way to the gap. Matt glanced curiously at the walls towering on either side of them. Snow lay in great drifts on the steep slopes. It would tumble down, choking the gap until warm rains in spring melted it. Then the flood water, forming a temporary lake behind the snow dam would rise, and cutting channels through it, clear the blockade.

Iron John stopped at last and pointed. "There they are!" he said angrily. "A herd worth sixty or seventy thousand dollars—trapped! Matt, that's enough to stir the fight in any man, and I'm glad you're seein' it. Tellin' about it would never give you the full picture."

The cattle had milled in a great circle, stamping down the snow and in some places churning up the half-frozen sod beneath. The snow continued to press in on all sides, drifts piling up with each new fall. Here and there some of the stronger animals had attempted to break away, only to flounder in the drifts.

"It's a proposition to get your teeth into, Matt," Iron John continued. "Now if we wipe out the Suttons, we might be able to clear away the Rim Trail and get them critters onto Sutton range. From there we could slowly work back to the home ranch. But it's got to be done fast. Snow's gettin' deeper all the time."

"It'll take time to clean out the Suttons," Matt said, "and there might not be enough of us left to do anything about the cattle. If you'll gamble, I think we can take 'em through the gap."

"Gamble? How can anything be

a gamble that's already lost?" Iron John demanded. "But unless you figgered a way for beef to walk on air, you can't drive 'em through the gap. Snow's twenty foot deep in spots."

"Got any powder?" Matt asked.

"About a ton down at the ranch," answered his father. "But I don't see what you want it for."

"Suppose I ride down, hitch up a team of four horses to a grain wagon, drive the load until we stall. The boys can meet me there and pack it in the rest of the way," Matt suggested. "I'll bring back several days' grub, powder, shovels and a scraper."

"Go ahead," Iron John said.

IT was several hours later when Matt drove the load to the camp at the gap. His father was waiting for him.

"Keep 'em movin'," Iron John said. "The boys have been ridin' back and forth all day long, poundin' down a trail."

Matt kept the team moving until a wall of snow stopped the leaders. Then everyone went to work with shovels and cleared the trail another quarter mile.

"No need of goin' any farther," Iron John told him. "Ahead there's a sharp pitch to the gap. No horse can climb the grade and pull a wagon behind him."

They unhitched and unloaded. Matt turned the empty wagon around and drove it back to camp. Everyone turned in until daybreak. It was so quiet the bellows of hungry cattle came steadily through the gap from Emigrant Valley.

"Fuel," Matt thought, "to feed the flame of Hardy hate for Sutton. And I can't blame the boys for wanting to clean 'em up. They've got it coming to them."

Iron John's bedroll was a little distance away, next to Steve's.

"Hear them hungry, bellerin' critters?" he whispered to Steve. "It's gettin' Matt, too. He ain't sleepin' well. He'll be one of us in a day or so. Mark my word."

"It should make you feel good, knowin' mom was wrong and you was right all these years," Steve remarked.

"I know I'm right. Dead right," said Iron John. "But I never was one to want to harp on the fact that someone was wrong—'specially your mother."

"I guess I'm harder'n you," Steve muttered. "When I'm right and somebody's wrong, I want 'em to know it. And know it plenty."

There was some grumbling when everyone rolled out. Joints were stiff from the previous day's work. Iron John cooked breakfast while the others looked after the stock.

Matt broke trail with his snowshoes, climbing above the gap until he reached the toe of rock that supported the snow. He deposited the case of powder he had carried on his back, and began the descent. For the second time since his return to the home country he heard the crack of a rifle, and a gentle thud behind him as the bullet buried itself in the snow.

He floundered along, his eyes picking the shortest trail to cover. He could see, far below, the upturned faces of his father and brothers. Then he dived headlong into the nearest thicket and waited for the rifleman to blast him out. Nothing happened. He got to his feet, and, crouching low, worked clear of the edge of the gap.

Fifteen minutes passed before a second shot came. Matt heard the bullet's drone, then the earth shook under his feet, and the air was filled

with snow. The bullet had struck the case of powder. Masses of snow were still flying through the air, when high up the steep slope the snowfield began cracking wide open. The split lengthened rapidly in each direction.

"A good thing he didn't hit the powder the first shot," Matt panted. "Or I'd have been caught in the slide." He hurried another fifty yards before turning to watch.

Everything was giving way under the pressure, and snow was spilling over the rim of the gap like tumbling water. The roar was deafening, but after a moment it died to an occasional crash as fragments, momentarily held by tree roots or branches, broke free.

The slope was bare of snow and grass. The partly frozen soil was scraped and gouged. Even the bellows of the hungry cattle were momentarily silent; then they came again, blending in a steady, pounding sound.

When Matt joined the others, Bart studied his face to determine the effect this had on his plans. Iron John was grim.

"I don't know what your plan was," he said, "but Marie Sutton's trumped your ace. That girl can sure use a rifle. It took a good shot to hit a case of powder half covered with snow."

"Let's clear out," Matt suggested. In bleak silence they saddled their horses and started back. A half mile below Matt halted.

"We stop here," he told them. "They can't see the rest of the road from up there. They won't know we've stopped. They'll figure starting that slide upset my plans."

"Well, didn't it?" asked Iron John.

"No. When Marie Sutton set off that case of powder," Matt said, "she played right into my hands."

They waited a couple of hours, then returned. Carrying the powder to the site of the slide, Matt put everyone to work digging pits at various points. He loaded the powder himself, varying the amount to suit conditions. Some charges would be delayed, and others would follow in quick succession.

When the others had moved to safe points, Matt lit the fuses, and ran. They all crouched, watching the slide area. Suddenly the earth trembled under a series of light explosions. Here and there masses of snow flew into the air. Larger masses moved, and then slowed down. Just as they were about to stop, the delayed charges let go, and then the whole mountain seemed to be tumbling into the gap. In a few minutes the snow-covered length of the gap was covered with muck, boulders and large masses of half-frozen sod.

"Get in there with picks and shovels," Matt ordered, "and see if we can't make a trail. Knock off the high points and dump dirt into the holes. Two men had better go back and get a horse and scraper up here."

They worked in two-hour shifts that night, and when Matt turned out shortly before daybreak, horse and men were covered with muck. But their work had not been for nothing. Tons of dirt covered a considerable stretch of packed snow.

CHAPTER III

"I LEAD—YOU FOLLOW!"

AFTER breakfast the Hardy men back-packed hay through the gap and dropped it along the trail they had made over the slide.

A big bull sniffed the hay and came charging through the snow, his body heaving upward and coming down, gradually hollowing out a

trench. He fell exhausted a couple of yards from the nearest hay, his tongue hanging from his mouth, his eyes rolling back.

The men, waist-deep in the snow, rolled him out of the way. The next bull pounded down the trench, reached the hay, ate it, then fought his way on to the next pile. A hungry cow, charging toward the feed, leaped onto the bull's back, knocked him down and went on twenty-five yards before she dropped. The hard-working men pulled both bull and cow aside.

The stampede was now on—coming at the men like a flying wedge. Only the depth of the snow saved Matt and his companions. They skirted drifts that stopped the cattle and fought their way through to the trail. Steve dropped a rope over a half-grown bull and, with Matt's help, hauled him up a pitch. Several men held him while the rope was removed. He stampeded the instant he was free, his legs sank into the soft spots, but his strength pulled him out. In a few minutes he disappeared through the gap—the first one to escape the death trap.

Others climbed slowly up the trail. Meanwhile the men worked fever,-ishly, nearly breaking their backs lifting animals out of the bad spots, and sending them on.

The sun climbed and spilled warmth into the gap, thawing ground that had previously supported the animals. Matt heard a crash high above him and yelled a warning. A rock whistled over his head, struck a yearling squarely in the side, knocked it thirty feet and killed it. Steve, his back against the wall, stared.

"Let's get out of here," he said finally.

"Can't," Matt answered. "We've got to take a chance. The cattle are coming, and if we leave they'll pile up and block the gap."

IRON JOHN, who had gone along the line, trotted back, his high-heeled boots throwing caked muck with each step. "They're tumblin' out of the gap in a stream," he yelled.

The roar of sliding muck drowned out his voice. Several tons skidded down the upper slope, leaving a bluish smear. It spilled like cake dough over the rim and into the gap. A dozen animals went down. Matt and his father plunged in and got the gasping critters' heads above the muck before they smothered. The other men plunged in, too, pulling on heads, legs and tails until the cattle were on their feet. A sudden roar filled Matt's ears, and the next thing he knew he was stretched out against the bank, watching a black sky change slowly to its normal blue.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"A hunk of frozen dirt fetched up agin' the back o' your head," a puncher answered. He gazed curiously at Matt, wondering if the incident had taught him a lesson. This business of rocks dropping almost without warning played havoc with a man's nerves.

Matt got to his feet and shook his head. The cattle were no longer plodding, heaving blurs to him. His head had cleared. Muck was coming again, and everyone except his father and Steve were flattening against the wall. The latter were stopping the cattle by main force.

The muck spilled over the rim again, plastering everyone. When the last of it had spread over the trail, they started the cattle moving once more. Pride alone kept the men on the job. As long as Matt stayed, they couldn't very well leave.

As the day passed they saw boul-

ders kill cattle. They fled from literal floods of muck, but they always came back. Finally a peak blotted out the sun's warm rays. They felt it grow colder in the canyon, and shortly after darkness fell the frost came and coated small pools, and crusted the muck.

Matt swung in behind the last animal, an old, crippled cow. His companions followed. In silence they turned in as soon as they reached camp. Every man carried bruises from the struggling cattle.

When Matt awakened, his father was building the fire. "A few stragglers are down," he said. Matt went and got them onto their feet. When he got back to camp Steve was saddling his horse.

"Where you going, Steve?" Matt asked.

"None of your blasted business!" Steve retorted savagely.

Matt was angry, but he said nothing. Steve ate his breakfast, drank several cups of hot coffee, then mounted and rode through the gap.

"What's he up to?" Matt asked Bart.

"Thinkin' of the Suttons, like as not," declared Bart. "Steve always has been one to pick up loose ends."

THEY spent the day following the trail left by the hungry herd. There were weak cattle to get off the ground, and a couple of injured ones to shoot, but when they turned in that night it was with the satisfaction of knowing the drive was a success The loss, Matt estimated, no more than fifteen or twenty.

The following morning Matt rode straight through to the ranch. Ah Sing was back in the kitchen.

"What about it?" Matt asked eagerly. "Did you find the mule and the Christmas packs?"

"No catch 'em mule," the cook answered dolefully.

"What about the packs? Didn't you see any sign of 'em? They might've been knocked off. There hasn't been enough snowfall to cover them."

"No see 'em pack," said Ah Sing. "I look-see all over. Bimeby lady boss ride up trail. I come back when she no see. I sweep, dust. She come home find house dirty, she get mad."

Matt grinned. "Mother always was the dickens on dirt in the corners," he agreed. "You've got things slicker'n a whistle. Where is she?"

"She go up her old bed. She tired," the Chinaman explained.

Matt waited in the dining room and presently his mother came down. She wanted to know how the other boys and their father were. Matt told her how they had got the cattle out of the gap.

"What of the Suttons?" she asked finally.

"I don't know," Matt said grimly. "Our men are in a fighting mood, Steve especially. You can't see hungry cattle—"

"I know! I know!" she interrupted wearily. "How far have you gone back, Matt? How much of what I've tried to teach you the last five years has been lost?"

"None," he answered.

"Are you sure?"

He considered the matter soberly, weighing the effects of range-war atmosphere on himself. It was impossible to determine what the bellowing of starved cattle and the threat of slides and the Sutton menace had done to him.

"No," he admitted reluctantly, "I'm not sure. But don't worry. I once figured all this out clearly. I weighed everything and arrived at

certain conclusions. I won't let myself lose sight of them."

AH SING came in and announced that someone was coming. Matt looked out the window and saw a girl with red hair riding up the trail. She dismounted, left her horse standing, and hurried up the steps. Matt met her at the door.

"Matt Hardy!" she exclaimed. "How you've grown!"

They shook hands. "Annie," Matt said seriously, "how did a freckled tyke like you ever manage to turn into such a pretty girl?"

Annie Gehagen blushed. "Get on with your blarney," she said. "It isn't deceiving me a bit. I'm still a homely mite." Then her face became grave. "I rode over to leave a Christmas present for Steve. We . . . we haven't been getting on, Matt. I do love him—terribly. But he seems so ruthless. Sometimes I think it would be better to stop seeing him, and tear my heart out in one chunk now instead of bit by bit later on."

"Steve's all right," insisted Matt. "If you just break his shell."

"The shell can't be broken," Annie said. "I've searched and searched for a little crack. And, Matt, you'll never know what one little crack would have meant. But I didn't come over here to cry on anyone's shoulder, nor to blame Steve. A man can't be less than a wolf and hope to hold his own with the wolves over the ridge." She nodded toward the Circle S.

"By the way, did you see anything of a mule on your way over?" Matt asked her. "Or scattered packs."

"No, why?"

"The mule loaded with mother's Christmas presents is wandering around somewhere," Matt said.

"Can't find hide nor hair of it."

"Oh, Matt!" the girl exclaimed.

Kate Hardy came into the room. "I heard what you said, Matt," she said as soon as she had greeted Annie Gehagen. "Let's hope for the best."

Matt swore softly. His mother

always kept her chin up, but he knew what those gifts meant to her. They were designed to soften her men a little. Let them be iron men against the world, if necessary, but at home she wanted them to be lovable, easygoing. And she wanted it before they all grew old and gray.

Annie placed her gift to Steve on a chair.

"I must go now," she said. "I don't want to meet Steve."

"Will you come over Christmas Day?" Kate Hardy asked.

"What's the matter with Steve coming over to my house?"

"He should. But won't you come over here first? Then Steve can ride back with you, after dinner. It'll make me happy. You see, Annie, I want someone with me for a while who understands how I feel. And you do, I think."

"Yes, I guess I do," the girl admitted. "Of course, I'll come." Riding away, she saw a line of riders in the distance, and knew the rest of the Hardy men were coming home.

IRON JOHN, Steve and Bart turned their horses loose in the corral and came slowly up the back walk to the house. They stopped at the steps—as Kate Hardy had taught them to do—scraped the muck from their boots on the blade of a hoe nailed to the wood. Iron John went in first. Steve nudged Bart in the ribs. "It's mom," he growled. "Why did she have to come just when we can clean up the Suttons? Well, she won't stop us." His face was hard and determined.

Kate Hardy didn't hear. She heard nothing, saw nothing except her husband's face. It was a little older—a little harder. Five years had made no other change in it.

There was a tense moment; then she said: "How are you, John? I came up for Christmas."

Iron John sensed from her words that she didn't intend to stay. "You're lookin' fine, Kate," he said. He kissed her awkwardly and said something about changing his clothes.

Kate Hardy turned, with outstretched hands. "Bart!" she cried happily.

Some of the reserve left Bart and he grinned. "Howdy, mom." He kissed her and patted her shoulder.

She gave Steve no chance to hurt her, but placed her hands on his heavy wrists and kissed him. "You haven't changed, Steve," she said. "You're just as I've pictured you so many times these years." Her words might have meant almost anything.

When their mother had gone upstairs again, Steve called his brothers together. "You'd better come over here, too," he said to his father, who had returned to the room after changing his clothes. "I rode up to the Rim Trail. Slides have cleared the deepest snow away. There's a quarter-mile stretch that'll come up to a horse's belly. We can get through."

Iron John nodded.

"The Suttons don't know we opened the gap and got our beef out," Steve continued. "They don't know we can ride through the gap, work along the edge of Emigrant Valley, then ride over Rim Trail and drop in on 'em from behind. They'll have a man or two watchin' the lower end of their spread for signs of us comin' at 'em, but that's all."

"We'll surprise 'em!" said Iron John.

"Yep," Steve declared. "We'll clean 'em out before they know what's happenin'."

"Everybody's there, seems like," Steve said. "I rode to within a mile of the big house. There was a lot of extra horses around, and lights in all the windows. Proves they're up to somethin'." He turned to Matt. "I strung with you on gettin' the beef out of the valley. Now I lead an' you follow. That was the understandin'."

"That was the understanding," Matt agreed.

CHAPTER IV

FOUR MEN—EIGHT HORSES

KATE HARDY listened quietly when her husband told her of Steve's plans.

"We're glad to have you back," he said, "and we hope you'll stay. But you've got to understand that things up here ain't changed. They can't change until the Suttons are wiped out. We sleep tonight, get up the

first thing in the mornin', and ride to Emigrant Valley. We can make good time now the trail's broke. We'll rest, then ride the Rim Trail late tomorrow afternoon. It should all be over by nine or ten o'clock tomorrow night."

"And that's Christmas Eve," she said quietly.

"Yeah, that's about the size of it," he admitted. "Comin' back we'll ride Sutton range to our boundary, then come on home. We'll make it in about four hours, mebbe less. If we sleep until eight or nine o'clock in the morning, we'll be all set for your plans on Christmas day. We'll make this a real Christmas."

"If you're alive," his wife said with a touch of bitterness. "If not—well, I'll make the best of it." She looked at Matt with a question in her eyes, but his face did not reveal his thoughts.

That night Kate Hardy paused briefly before each door and listened. Iron John slept soundly, and so did his three sons. An amazing breed that could sleep soundly before the finish fight over a range. It was a breed to be proud of, and to preserve. And Kate Hardy was proud of her men. She went to her own room, but not to sleep. She could only stare at the ceiling, hour after hour, wondering what the outcome of it all would be. She heard Ah Sing stirring about in the kitchen at last, and presently the aroma of coffee filled the house. A few minutes later she heard the clumping of hard, high heels on floor and stairway. She dressed and went down.

They sat eating silently, hardly ever looking at one another, and never at her. Iron John stood up when the last man had finished.

"Might as well get started," he said. "I know you're takin' this hard, Kate, but I promise you one thing: After tonight there'll be the peace on the range we've all wanted."

Kate Hardy walked to a window, turned off the lights so her husband wouldn't see her standing there, and watched. They were in the barn a long time, but at last Iron John rode out. He was mounted on his poorest horse and leading his best.

"Saving the best for the last," she murmured. "And that is right."

Steve came next, then Bart. Matt, her youngest, was last. Each led a spare horse. She watched them slowly fade into the gloom of a day that was hardly dawning—four men and eight horses riding away perhaps never to return.

She walked back to the dining room, and forced herself to eat some breakfast. When she had finished, she rose from the table, feeling Ah Sing's solicitous eyes on her.

"I'm going to saddle and ride," she told him. "Perhaps I can find that pesky mule and my Christmas presents. I must . . . must— Never mind, Sing."

But the old cook understood. She wanted to salvage something from the wreckage of her Christmas plans.

KATE HARDY returned late in the afternoon, and Ah Sing knew from the horse's weariness that she had covered a lot of country.

"I looked in all the places I thought a mule might go to escape cold weather," she explained. "But I didn't see so much as a mule track. Mule, packs, and everything have vanished in thin air. But I did find a perfect Christmas tree."

Ah Sing beamed. He knew, from experience, that only a certain kind of tree would do. It must be even on all sides, and the branches numerous and leafy. Such trees grew apart

and the light struck them on all sides.

"We catch 'em now?" Sing inquired.

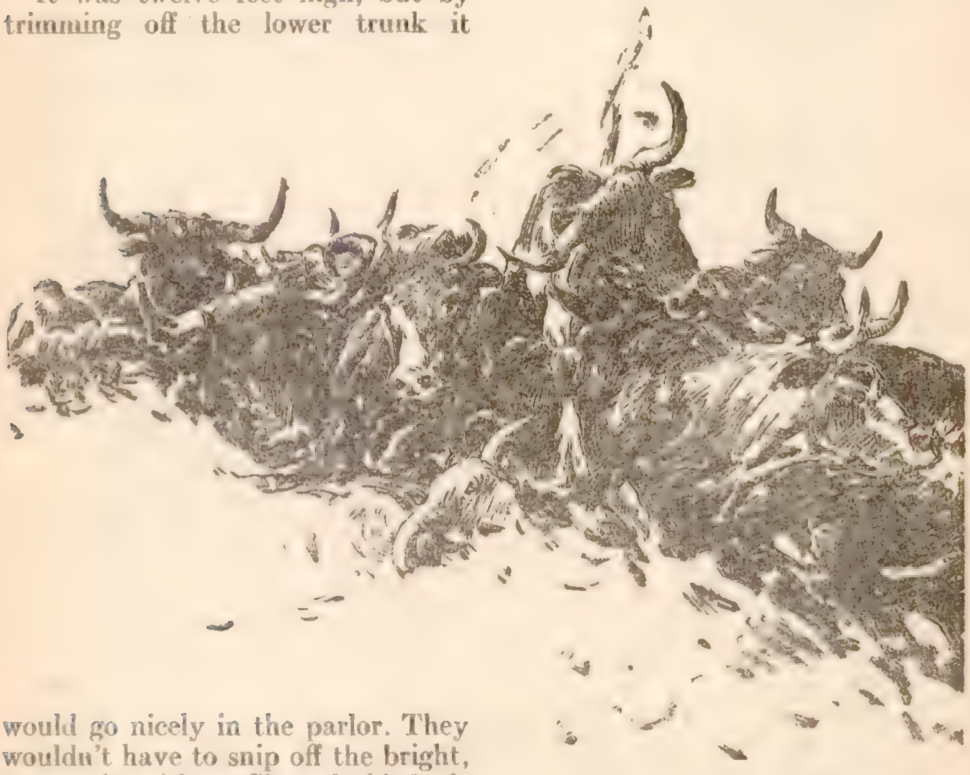
"I'm tired, but let's get it now," she said.

Sing hurried out and hitched up a spring wagon. He drove around to the door and picked up Kate Hardy, then followed her instructions. They had to open a half dozen gates and drive over open range for two miles, but when Sing saw the tree he knew it was worth it.

It was twelve feet high, but by trimming off the lower trunk it would go nicely in the parlor. They wouldn't have to snip off the bright, green tip either, Sing decided; it spoiled a tree to cut off the tip.

The old Chinaman cut the tree and loaded it on the wagon. It was nearly dusk by the time they reached home and set the tree up in the parlor. While Sing prepared supper, Kate Hardy went up to the attic to find some decorations to take the place of those lost in her Christmas packs. Clouds of dust sifted through the air as she took out ornaments that had done service at long-ago Christmas celebrations. They brought back a flood of memories that she put resolutely out of mind.

After supper Kate decorated the tree. When it was finished she called Sing in to see it. They were looking at the gay, tinsel-decorated evergreen when Kate heard the hoof thud of an approaching horse.



"Listen, someone is coming," she said. "Perhaps it's one of the boys, Sing!"

Ah Sing listened. He loved these people. Their distress was his distress, and the mixture of hope and fear in his mistress' voice troubled him. A single horse was coming slowly. That meant good news. One with bad news travels hard. Still, he

reasoned, it might mean a horse carrying a wounded man. Perhaps the only survivor. He looked quickly at Kate Hardy's face, and realized that she was thinking the same thing. He opened the door, then grinned.

"Here Steve's girl," he said.

Annie Gehagen dismounted and hurried in, brushing snow from her clothing.

"One of our men said Iron John and the boys were riding over Sutton way," she explained, "and I . . . well . . . I just couldn't stay away."

"I am glad you came," Kate told her. "I felt the need of someone. But we aren't going to sit up and wait. We're going to bed and rest—even if we can't sleep."

She showed the girl to a spare room, then retired to her own. She undressed and lay on her back, her head turned slightly as she watched the snow fall against the windowpane. It wasn't snowing hard down here yet, but she knew from experience that a regular blizzard must be raging on the Rim Trail.

"And this," she thought, " 'is the night before Christmas, when all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.' " But tonight there's so much stirring—memories of other Christmas Eves and Christmas Days that seem so far away."

CHAPTER V

ON RIM TRAIL

STEVE HARDY cursed the heavily falling snow as his horse pushed through the drifts in a series of heaves and lurches. The animal

The stampede raged through the snow drifts straight at the trapped men!

was tiring, but Steve wasn't ready yet to shift the saddle to his spare horse. He wanted him fresh for action down on the Circle S spread.

Behind Steve rode Iron John, then Bart. Matt brought up the rear. They rested a moment in a place where the snow had gone off during a warm spell.

"Even this stretch is gettin' deep," Steve said. "It wasn't snowin' hardly at all when we rode through Emigrant Valley. Didn't snow much in the valley, either, but she sure is comin' down here."

"A good thing," declared Iron John. "We'll know we can't retreat. Not that any of us is goin' to, but when a man knows he can't run for it, he fights all the harder."

They resumed the struggle, and ten minutes later they had passed over the rim and were dropping rapidly. Two hours later they reached the bench on which the Sutton home was built. There they changed horses, freeing the tired animals, which would eventually make their way home.

Steve led the way over the bench, opening gates and closing them again when the others had passed through. There wasn't a breath of air stirring, and the snow was thinning, too. At times they could see as much as two hundred feet ahead.

Steve stopped again. "I'll ride ahead and size things up," he said. "I know where the buildings are. We don't want to get snarled up and make a lot of noise."

He came back in about ten minutes. "Place is all lit up like a church," he reported jubilantly. "Everybody's inside, where it's warm, I guess. Barns are shut up and snow's drifted agin' the doors. No fresh tracks anywhere, so it ain't likely we'll meet anybody prowlin' around. If we do, knock 'em in the head and shut 'em up. No gunplay unless you have to. Here's the plan. There's four windows on this side of the parlor. We'll each take one window and pick out two men for targets. When I signal, we'll fire. If we shoot fast, we can get both the men we've picked out before they can move."

Iron John and Bart nodded. They all looked at Matt.

"Let's go and get it over with," he said.

"I'm stickin' close to you, Matt," Steve told him. "You ain't proved yourself yet."

"Getting the cattle out of the Emigrant Valley trap should rate honorable mention in the matter of proving myself," Matt retorted. "But stick as close as you like."

Matt followed Steve, then the four separated slightly and advanced. The Suttons, in the excitement of a family gathering, had failed to pull down the curtains. Or perhaps they felt the snow would keep the Hardys off the Rim Trail, and the guard at the lower end of their valley would stop anyone foolish enough to approach the easy way.

MATT worked his way ahead of Steve and looked into the parlor. The first thing he saw was a Christmas tree. It stood in a corner and was covered with decorations. Sharon Sutton, his white beard almost covering his stomach, was sitting in a creaky rocking chair. His six sons sat in chairs tilted back against the wall.

Sharon's voice came faintly: "Yes, sir, there's a Santa Claus. He's about my build and he's got whiskers like me."

Matt shifted his position in an effort to determine the identity of the old man's listeners. Now he saw. There were several youngsters,

both boys and girls, dressed in their nightgowns and listening wide-eyed, to a Christmas story.

"Did you really see Santa Claus?" a boy asked.

"As sure as I'm settin' here," answered Sharon. "I was up on the Rim Trail the night before Christmas. It was just such a night as this. Cold enough to freeze your whiskers. All good people was indoors or huntin' lost stock, like the Hardys. Well, sir, I heard the tinkle of sleigh bells, and I got off the trail pronto. And there come Santa Claus, down the Rim Trail, hittin' only the high spots. When he come to a little valley he'd sail right through the air. He had a sleigh loaded with toys, and his reindeer had their heads up in the air, proud-like."

"Where'd he go."

"He went straight to this here house and come down the chimney," Sharon Sutton continued. "And filled every sock until it couldn't hold any more, then he put the extra things on the floor where we'd find 'em in the mornin'."

"Did he leave you anything?" asked one of the girls.

"Lord love you, yes," Sharon Sutton answered. "That year I got a brand-new mustache cup and saucer, some carpet slippers, and a lot of other things."

Matt pushed Steve back. "We can't shoot now—not with all those kids there."

Steve said nothing. Iron John came over and said: "They're all there." Bart, his clothing covered with snow, remained where he was, watching his older brother curiously. He wondered if Steve had pictured any such complication as this.

In the Sutton parlor the children were asking eager questions. "Where'd Santa Claus go after he left us?" One boy stared up at Sharon, his face flushed with excitement. "Did he go to the Hardys?"

Sharon Sutton tugged at his beard and laughed uproariously. "No, the Hardys are so mean they stuff their chimney full of dirt so Santa Claus can't get in. They don't have Christmas over there."

"The doggone liar!" Iron John muttered.

"Santa Claus won't come, kids," Sharon Sutton continued, "until you're sound asleep. Now hang up your stockings and hightail it to bed."

Matt stepped closer to the window and well to one side. He saw old Mrs. Sutton, and the wives of the Sutton boys, but his glance lingered on a beautiful girl in a corner. She was old Sutton's youngest daughter, and a chip off the old block he had heard.

At last the children were sent upstairs to bed, and the men and women began moving about. "We'll have to wait until they get set again," Steve whispered. "Don't git too close to them windows. Somebody might look out." Suddenly he stiffened. "What the—" he began.

Matt had taken his gun from its holster and the muzzle touched Steve's ribs. "Listen, Steve," he said, "we can't shoot Santa Claus on Christmas Eve! We're clearing out."

"Matt," Steve answered evenly, "I'll never forgive you for this." At a poke from Matt's gun, he moved over near Iron John and Bart. "He's got the drop on me. On all of us," Steve said. "And we'll never forgive him."

"You can't shoot Santa Claus," Matt insisted doggedly. "Now let's get going. Have I got your word you won't make any false moves?"

They agreed and Matt holstered his gun.

"There's one thing I'm goin' to do, anyway," Steve said. "Hang my wreath."

He went back to his horse and got the wreath of barbed wire and bullets. He walked quietly around to the front door, removed the holly wreath he found there, and replaced it with his own. Then he joined the others. Matt took the lead, following a route that would take them well clear of any Sutton guards who might be around.

CHAPTER VI

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

MATT set the pace, but it wasn't long until his father was riding beside him.

"Tonight you went soft, Matt," Iron John said. "I'm not holdin' it agin' you, but it's the biggest mistake the Hardys ever made. The Suttons'll figger we're sentimental weaklings. So far they've been afraid of us. Now they'll think they've got us licked."

Matt didn't argue the point. "If they're that big fools they'll find us waiting," was all he said.

The snow continued to fall lightly all the way to Slash H. The Hardys routed out a couple of men to care for their horses, then trooped into the house. Ah Sing was on hand with coffee. Matt had seen his mother's face at her bedroom window, counting her menfolk as they came up the walk.

"Matt went soft on us," Iron John told his wife when she came down. "Headed off the best chance we ever had. Nobody was hurt. Not a shot fired. It's a situation that needs to be slept on." He gulped down the last of his coffee. "I'm goin' to turn in. Steve, send a couple of boys up to Mallard Springs to stop any ambitious Suttons that might ride this way."

It was about nine o'clock in the morning when the Hardys gathered in the parlor. Kate Hardy had located the well-darned stockings of their boyhood and hung them up on the fireplace. Each contained a package, and Matt knew the story behind that. Somehow his mother had managed to make some Christmas presents to replace the lost ones.

There was a fire in the fireplace, and it highlighted the tinsel and ornaments on the tree.

"Merry Christmas, mom," Matt said. "Been up long?"

"About an hour," she answered. "Here come Steve and Bart. Oh, hello, Annie." The girl had appeared through another door. "Merry Christmas."

Iron John came down last. He was stiff and unbending, a man who was puzzled and troubled inwardly. He acknowledged their greetings, and after some hesitation opened the package in his old sock.

"Thanks . . . Kate," he said reluctantly. "I feel kinda cheap not havin' anything for you."

"You didn't know I was coming," she said, smiling at him. "Anyway, having you all here in my Christmas."

He walked over to the windows and began pulling down the shades. "The Suttons made the mistake of leavin' 'em up," he explained. "They could sneak up on us in this snow."

"They could get within thirty feet of the window and not be seen," Steve said. He was sitting near Annie Gehagen. Matt, letting his eyes linger a moment on the pair, realized there was a deep feeling between them, but the barrier of Steve's iron

make-up was keeping the girl at a distance.

The morning passed slowly enough. Matt felt there must be some common ground on which all could meet, but no one seemed able to find it. "It might've been different," he thought, "if that cussed mule hadn't wandered off. We'd have had the things mother planned. And the gifts I had bought for her. It's the worst Christmas she's ever had, and it should be the best. Everyone's nerves are on edge. And now here comes Steve. I suppose he wants to tie into me over what happened last night."

"I want to talk to you, Matt," Steve said. "It's about Annie," he said as they went upstairs to his room. "How does a man get a girl out of his head?"

"I shouldn't think a man would want to get a girl like Annie out of his head," Matt returned.

"We don't seem to speak the same lingo," Steve complained. "I ain't comfortable with her, but when she's away I seem emptylike inside. Nothin' seems right. Chairs ain't comfortable, I can't sleep, and Ah Sing's grub ain't got no taste. Some men have corns that upset 'em, and others have girls. I got a girl."

"I'd consider a few changes in myself if I felt that way about a girl," Matt said.

"But can a man change hisself?" Steve persisted.

"I don't know, but he can discover elements in his character he hasn't known existed," Matt said. "Why don't you stop worrying about it and wait until Christmas is over with?"

THE tenseness in the Hardy house continued into the afternoon. Iron John smoked hard and constantly, filling the rooms with clouds of smoke. He couldn't get rid of the feeling that a great mistake had been made and the trouble with the Suttons would increase.

At four o'clock, one of the guards rode up. "A Sutton's comin'," he said. "Snuck past us. Snow's kinda thick over that way."

"I told you so!" Iron John exclaimed. "Get the guns, boys, and let 'em know we ain't the softies they think—"

"It's just one," the guard cut in. "Marie Sutton. She can't be dangerous."

"Let me handle this," Matt said. He went outside, and presently he saw Marie riding slowly up the road. She was leading a pack-laden mule. The animal looked familiar to Matt, and so did the heavy pack which was now lightly covered with snow.

"Merry Christmas!" he yelled.

"Merry Christmas," answered the girl, smiling at him. "I thought you might want this load."

"We do," Matt said. "Where did you find the critter?"

"It wasn't a matter of finding," Marie replied. "This mule was hired out to us last summer as a pack animal, when we were bringing up powder for blasting. Naturally, when the mule started wandering about with a load, it headed for our place."

"That's logical enough," Matt agreed. "And did you know it carried the Hardy Christmas presents?"

"Yes," she said. "I wanted to bring them over before this, but my brother, who was with me when the mule arrived, wouldn't let me. 'They're a bunch of killin' wolves,' he insisted, 'and Christmas don't mean a thing to 'em!' "

"Then what?"

"We cached the packs in the barn,

and said nothing to the rest of the family," the girl continued. "I hoped to soften my father—he really isn't a man with horns, you know—and later bring your presents over. You see, more than Christmas was involved."

Matt looked interested. "What, for instance?"

"The future of this region," Marie told him. "I was sent down to the flat country to school. Naturally education broadened my viewpoint on many things. I knew the range war was dead wrong and costly to both sides, but I felt if we tried to reason things out with you Hardys, you'd think it was an admission of weakness, and hit harder than ever. When I came back into the old atmosphere, I soon began hating like the others, and blinding myself to plain horse sense."

"I understand," he said. "Mom took me below for the same reason. She has always had plenty of vision, but not much chance to use it. I came up here full of the crusader zeal and somebody fired on me. I felt the old range-war air choking me."

"I fired on you," Marie confessed. "I hoped to turn you back. I didn't shoot to kill. Later I heard you were all heading for Emigrant Valley." She shrugged her shoulders. "That meant you must be stopped. The boys wanted to wipe you out, but I stopped that after a little hard talking. We didn't want funerals on Christmas Day, I told them, and they saw things my way."

"So you rode over, sized up the situation, put a bullet into my powder?" he asked.

"Yes," she told him. "When the snow went down I thought the valley was blocked. You rode off in seeming defeat." She smiled at him. "Sliding dirt onto the snow was really a smart scheme."

"We used the slide in the gap in our ride to Rim Trail last night," Matt explained.

"What changed your mind?" she asked. "We saw by the tracks in the snow that you had stood before our windows. You could have wiped out every one of the Suttons. But you didn't."

"You can't shoot Santa Claus," Matt told her, and intuitively Marie knew what was behind the brief answer.

"You stopped them, of course," she said. "While your mother had the right idea in giving you a different and broader viewpoint, what happened last night was the climax. We, all of us, from my grim old father, to my bitter, fighting brothers, knew the Hardys were not all iron, nor all wolf, either. We knew, without talking about it, that they were just some folks like ourselves." She turned a puzzled face toward him. "And yet we found a wreath of bullets and barbed wire on the front door."

"Steve's final gesture," explained Matt.

"Well, early this morning I told father about your Christmas packs. He thought some of the boys should take it over," she said, "but I was afraid of misunderstandings, quick tempers and hot lead. So I came alone. And—here we are."

SHE jumped to the ground, and one of the old-timers took her horse. She shed her slicker and stamped the snow from her trim riding boots. She was wearing overalls, covered with warm chaps, and she presented what Bart termed a "mighty fetchin' pitcher."

Matt pushed her through the door. "Here she is, folks; Marie Sutton—Santa Claus in chaps."

Bart and Steve went outside and brought in the Christmas packs.

"Bring them into the parlor," their mother told them. She turned to Marie. "Do come in, my dear. You'll stay to dinner, won't you? You've made us all very happy."

"Thank you, Mrs. Hardy," the girl smiled. "I'd love to stay to dinner. But I must ride home afterward. We always sing carols on Christmas night."

"We do, too," Kate Hardy said. "I play the organ. But it hasn't been touched for five years, and it'll be terribly out of tune, I'm afraid. Won't you sing one song with us right after dinner?"

"Of course," Marie agreed. Sitting down with Annie, she watched the Hardys unwrap their packages. It was like home, she thought, with the mound of bright paper and ribbons growing higher and higher. It was like home, too, in that these men who had carved a living out of a hard country found it so hard to express their appreciation for their gifts. They could not put sentiment in words.

The men donned their new neckties and slippers, and munched on candy despite Mrs. Hardy's warnings that it would spoil their appetites. "Christmas is the same all over," Marie thought. "With the Hardys or Suttons; on the range or in the city."

Marie saw Matt looking at her, and when he jerked his head toward a nearby room, she followed. "Here's something to take home with you."

"A map?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "A map of this country up here. It was in the pack along with Christmas presents. I made several copies. Here's Emigrant Pass and Emigrant Valley, and here's the slide. Now if we all work together, we can blast the dirt off the other side of the gap."

"That will make a pile of dirt in the gap so high no one can get through, unless a road is cut out of solid rock," she objected.

"I know it," he answered. "But here's the play. A lot of the material will be snow. The pressure of the dirt will pack it hard. It'll be ice, in fact."

"I see, this will be a dam to trap the annual run-off when the chinook comes," she said. "It'll turn Emigrant Valley into a lake. And it will cover thousands of our acres of grazing land. Have you an answer for that?"

"We'll run a ditch from the dam in the gap, following this row of hills. It'll be a dirt ditch most of the way, with flumes across gulches. We can bring in a portable sawmill and cut our own lumber. We've plenty of timber. We'll run smaller ditches from the main one, and water Slash H range the year around. Under irrigation Slash H range can support all of its own cattle, plus yours, twelve months of the year. That leaves all your range for increased herds," he concluded.

"It sounds fine," Marie admitted, "but can you prove it with figures?"

"Yes; got 'em all here, down to the last acre of range in our combined holdings and the last head of beef," he said. "This is just a rough outline for you to take home. Later on I'll come over and talk about it in detail. There'll have to be an agreement, of course. We may even organize a company, with shares of stocks and all that. But if we start now, on the lower range where the dirt hasn't frozen, we can follow the frost right up to the gap as the coun-

try warms up next spring."

"We have the men, the horses and equipment for ditching," Marie agreed. "And, what's more important, the beginnings of mutual faith. I suppose we'll have to do this by degrees. It'll take some time to persuade our fathers to bury the hatchet."

"That'll be our job," Matt said. "Shall we join the others? I think Ah Sing has dinner ready."

IRON JOHN sat at the head of the table and carved the turkey. Matt wondered what his father thought of having a Sutton at his table on Christmas Day. Throughout the meal he was grave, and though he ate heartily he seemed glad when dinner was over and he could smoke once more.

They closed the door between parlor and dining room, then sat around and talked. Once or twice Iron John looked toward the organ, then suddenly he got to his feet.

"There's somethin' I'd like to say," he began. "Kate and I disagreed at times, but we never quarreled. We got along, mostly, by each givin' a little and takin' a little. We never did see eye to eye on the Suttons."

Marie stared straight at the fire. The others, she felt, were uncomfortable, but she knew the big, grim man would say nothing to make her feel uneasy.

"They called me Iron John," he went on, "but there was just as much iron in Sharon Sutton. I felt we couldn't treat the Suttons like humans, and that we had to fight fire with fire. My wife claimed my viewpoint was narrow. She watched me make iron men out of the two oldest boys. Then she kicked over the traces and took Matt down to the flat country. After five long years Matt came back."

He stopped and his next words came more slowly.

"Matt had to measure up. Prove hisself before his opinion and words packed any weight," Iron John continued. "He proved himself. Any man that'd take the chances he took up there in the gap, with boulders rainin' down from above, is a man in anybody's language. You all know what happened after that. What happened at Circle S and here. I here and now admit I was dead wrong the way I sized things up. I think peace is comin' to the country before it's too late. It's come at a fittin' time, Christmas. Knowin' somethin' of myself, I reckon it could only have come at Christmas time."

Marie glanced at Matt, remembering his words: "You can't kill Santa Claus."

"I ain't goin' to ask Kate to forgive me," Iron John continued, "because she's the kind that never holds things agin' a man. I'm just telling her and all of you no man ever had a finer wife. Well, that's that. Marie, here, has a long, hard ride ahead of her, so maybe we'd better sing a song or two."

Kate Hardy's eyes were bright with happy tears as she walked to the organ. She gave her husband's hard-muscled arm an understanding pinch as she passed, then sat down on the organ bench. Her fingers touched the keys, and music, sweet and clear, filled the room.

"Why, John!" she exclaimed. "You've kept this organ in tune all these years."

"I . . . I wanted it ready when you come back, Kate," he muttered.

Annie looked at Steve, wondering if perhaps he, too, didn't have a streak of sentiment hidden deep in

his iron character. They had finished the first verse of "Silent Night" and were on the second before she stopped wondering—and hoping. Steve's voice, deep and rich, blended with the others. Then Iron John's came in. There were moments when he was off key; other moments when he was silent because he didn't remember the words of the hymn. But he found a deep peace in adding his bass when he could.

"Sleep in heavenly peace," they concluded. "Sleep in heavenly peace."

A satisfying silence filled the room as the last note died. At last Marie turned to Kate Hardy. "I'd like to stay," she said reluctantly, "but I know you'll understand. It's a long, lonely ride—"

"Long, but not lonely," interrupted Matt. "I'm going along with you."

"But you don't need to," the girl told him. "From now on the Hardys and Suttons can ride without fear."

"I know it," said Matt cheerfully. "But I'm going along anyway—just for the ride."

Marie shook hands with all the Hardy men, and kissed Kate and Annie. "Be happy, both of you," she whispered.

STEVE and Annie went outside with Matt and Marie, and closed the front door behind them. A puncher was bringing up the horses.

"Just a minute, Matt," Steve said. "I've been thinkin' about things. Maybe somethin' needs clearin' up. You throwed a gun on me when we stood in front of the Suttons' windows and said you wouldn't let me shoot Santa Claus. And I said I'd never forgive you for throwin' a gun on me."

"That's right, Steve," Matt said. "But I hope you will."

"No," Steve answered, "I'm afraid I can't. I wouldn't have held it agin' you for stoppin' me from shootin' a Sutton. What got my dander up is you thinkin' for a minute I'd be mean and low enough to shoot Santa Claus. Doggone it, feller, where'd you ever get the idea I was *that* tough."

"My mistake, Steve," Matt grinned, "and I apologize."

He held out his hand and the last of Steve's resentment faded. "I reckon I might as well go whole hog on this and forgive you," he said, grasping Matt's hand. "That's the way I feel about it. Well, so long, you two."

He watched them vanish into the thick, white swirl of snow. Then, as he and Annie turned to go back into the house, they saw a Christmas wreath on the door. A broad grin spread over Steve's craggy face.

"Them cussed Suttons," he chuckled. "They got the best of us at that. Marie made a holly wreath out of my barbed-wire one and hung it on our door."

He had his arm around Annie, and as he looked down at her he saw a look of happiness in her eyes that had not been there for a long time. She smiled up at him and snuggled closer into the hollow of his arm. Steve's arm tightened around her.

"Annie," he said, "this is just like the old days before you seemed afraid of me. You girls are sure funny. One minute a man can't touch you with a ten-foot pole, the next you're as sweet as a kitten. You'd think I'd suddenly changed."

"You haven't," Annie told him. "You've just learned to turn the other side so I can see it. And I . . . I like it very much, Steve."

THE END.

Straight at Klawock plummeted Death Wing and the human killer knew the terror of the hunted!

WINGED DOOM

BY KENNETH GILBERT

As the yellow moon lifted above the jagged skyline of Tatoosh peaks, it was greeted by a hollow, booming sound, unearthly and weird in the night hush of the summery woods, "*whoo—oo-ooo—ooo!*" Old Death Wing, the great horned owl who haunted the devil-club swamp at the edge of the high meadow, was abroad in his night hunting, and his call was like the voice of doom to the smaller

wilderness creatures. All knew old Death Wing and feared him.

Even the two men heard and understood, although they were a mile apart—old Bill Pack, toiling up the trail to his cabin near the swamp; and the renegade Indian, Klawock, waiting for Pack's arrival. The fierce call, ghostly in the stillness, produced strange and opposite effects on them.

Pack, climbing the steep trail, grunted wrathfully. "Plumb forgot about *you!*" he declared, thinking of the horned owl. "Every winter and spring now for three years you've raided my mink and marten traps. Lost me hundreds of dollars' worth of fur. Tomorrow I'll find where your nest is in that swamp, and put a bullet through you!"

But the hidden Klawock had no such thought; rather the lugubrious cry of the great owl stirred his superstitious fears. Old Bill Pack, whom Klawock had vowed to kill because the white man had caught him robbing a beaver trap that spring and had booted him into the cold waters of Hurricane Creek, was a strange and dangerous man who lived in a strange spot. Klawock knew—although Pack would have hooted at the idea—that the white man's cabin was built on *tamanawos* ground, a natural clearing where no trees grew because it was the gathering place of *mesatchie* spirits. The deep night silence, the rising moon, pale as fireweed honey, and now that spine-tingling call of the owl—these things awakened uneasiness in the lurking killer.

But they did not shake his determination to kill Pack, and he fingered the haft of the knife at his belt as he lifted his head from the rank growth of vine maple which screened him. The moonlight fell on his dark features and on the hand-made cap of untanned beaver pelt of which he was proud. Bill Pack had no dog, which made Klawock's job easier. He would wait until Pack came home and got to sleep. Klawock could have used a gun, but he preferred his knife, which was silent, swift and efficient. He sank down again in the salal as old Death Wing's hunting cry once more went echoing through the silent forest.

Meanwhile, as Bill Pack moved on up the trail, the moon lifted and the way grew lighter. But when the trapper reached the edge of the clearing where his cabin stood he paused, and the warning he had received that day in the settlement came back to him more distinctly.

"There's talk that this Injun, Klawock, is on your trail, Bill," Jim Streeter, deputy sheriff for that district, and Pack's old-time friend, had told him. "Better be careful!"

Pack had taken the warning lightly. "I ran him out of the Hurricane Creek country once," he declared. "He's back in the Makoos hills and he'll stay there."

"But he ain't," insisted Streeter. "He drifted through here last week, and when some of the boys started ridin' him about what you done when you caught him robbin' your trap line, he blew up and made cracks that he was goin' to get square. Like as not it's only Injun talk—but if you're smart, you'll keep your eyes peeled!"

That phrase, "keep your eyes peeled!" came back to the old hillman just now, as though a tiny tocsin of alarm was clanging away in his brain. Yonder was the cabin in the moonlight, and everything looked as it had when he left the day before. But the sixth sense

which most wilderness men possess seemed to convey a hint of hidden danger.

As Pack stood there, peering about warily, studying the situation, old Death Wing's call came again.

THE big owl was hungry, and so were his mate and fledglings in that queer jumble of sticks set high in the crotch of a lightning-blasted snag back in the swamp. While his mate watched over the nest, Death Wing hunted. If he came back with game—a fat rabbit or squirrel—it would be her turn to hunt while he watched over the three gawky owlets whose appetite never seemed satisfied.

Death Wing had ears like sensitive microphones, and it seemed to him that he heard a slight sound in the vine-maple thicket, as though some small animal had stirred nervously when he gave his hunting call. Silently as a ghost, the owl floated over the spot, his round eyes like twin moons as they peered for the game. The waiting Klawock was screened from above, and Death Wing did not suspect the man's presence; nor was the Indian aware that the feathered killer, broad pinions hushed, had passed twenty feet above him. Then, just as Death Wing wheeled to fly back to the tall fir where he usually sat when uttering his dread cry, he veered suddenly and dived.

Until then his flight had seemed heavy and awkward, but now he moved with surprising quickness, vanishing for an instant in the deep grass which fringed a spring-fed pool. From the spot came a shrill, prolonged cry which told of death, and the tense Klawock flinched and let out a startled gasp. A moment later the big owl was beating silently toward his nest in the swamp, a half-grown cottontail rabbit clutched in his strong talons.

Klawock knew and understood wilderness sound, but the superstitious fears which stirred his imagination as he kept vigil over his *tamanawos* spot had made the death scream of the hapless rabbit sound like nothing he had ever heard before. The Indian believed that it was the wail of a *mesatchie* spirit, and he had a strong impulse to get up and run. But he had come here to kill old Bill Pack, and he had waited nearly two days to do it, while the trapper was away at the settlement. The old man probably would return tonight, and Klawock was determined not to let this opportunity pass. He summoned his courage again and once more settled down to wait, comforting himself with the feel of the long knife he carried. At that moment he saw the man for whom he was waiting.

Old Bill Pack came out of the brush cautiously, short-barreled rifle slung across the crook of his left arm. He had the queer feeling that something was wrong, but he couldn't place what it was.

"Nerves!" he told himself disgustedly. "I'm gettin' as scary as an old woman!" But he did not go boldly to the cabin.

There might be something to Streeter's warning after all; if there was, then the cabin would be a likely trap. No need to rush things. He'd scout around and, when daylight came, he'd be able to discover Klawock's sign, if the Indian was hanging about.

THERE was another reason why Pack didn't want to go into the cabin just yet. This was a perfect night for the big owl to hunt, and it might be possible to get a shot at

the bird. Strengthening moonlight made the woods almost as bright as in daylight. Pack had heard Death Wing hooting steadily from one spot and surmised that the owl was in a tall fir which stood apart from other trees, towering over the thick brush. There was a way Pack could be revenged on the predatory Death Wing that would be simpler than trying to find the bird's nest in the swamp. He'd maneuver close enough to the tree to get it outlined against the rising moon; then it should be possible to pick out the big owl's shape from the interlaced screen of branches. It was light enough to see his gun sights, and if he got a clear shot at Death Wing, he wouldn't miss.

If Klawock were near, he would hear the shot, but Bill Pack was inclined to believe that the vengeful Indian was nowhere about. If he were lurking in the woods, it might be a good thing. Pack could kill Death Wing, then take up a new position, from which he could watch the approach of Klawock if the latter was attracted by the sound of the shot.

Silently Pack slipped through the brush, with all the craft of a hunting cat stalking its prey. At last he reached the point he sought, a brush covert about fifteen yards from the base of the fir. Now he could look right through the branches, and the owl's body should be outlined starkly against the sky. Gun ready, he began studying every pattern of shadow up there, trying to pick out the bulky form of the big bird.

But somehow Pack couldn't discover his feathered enemy, and he decided at last that Death Wing had left the tree. He settled himself to wait, for he knew the owl would be back.

Yet Death Wing did not come in the first half hour, nor the next. Pack felt his muscles beginning to cramp, and to relieve them he was forced to change the position of his body. The moon swung past the tree, and Pack moved a little farther to the left, for it was important to keep the lacy pattern of branches against the glow in the sky.

The cabin was not far off, and Pack thought yearningly of his bunk waiting for him. He had tramped many miles that day, and he was tired. Yet he was stubbornly determined to settle Death Wing's hash and he would not give up. Then there came to him a plan whereby he might still wait for the owl, and at the same time give way to the impulse to sleep.

Just back of him was a log, an old windfall perhaps two feet in diameter. The night was warm, the ground dry, and Pack knew that he could stretch his body alongside the log and have a snooze. He was certain to awaken when Death Wing returned to the fir and began hooting again. That booming hunting cry almost over the man's head should waken a corpse, he reasoned. So, with his gun beside him, Pack snuggled alongside the windfall and was asleep almost before his head hit the ground.

Just how long he slept, there was no way of his knowing, but when he came awake the first sensation he had was a return of that feeling of danger. Something was wrong! He knew that even as he lay there wide awake, yet unstirring. His lids parted slowly and he stared up at the tree above him.

There was still a glow beyond the tree and he realized then that he hadn't slept long. There was a crisscross of branches and twigs up there,

but at one spot they seemed to be darker. Suddenly he saw movement, and knew that Death Wing had returned!

PACK'S first impulse was to reach for his gun, straighten his body around until he was in position to shoot. He was sure that he wouldn't miss, for the moonlight was as strong as ever. Perhaps it was some vague intuition which kept him moveless—or maybe his ears had caught a faint sound, like the snapping of a twig, which came from behind the log. Bill Pack knew the night sounds of the woods, but he had difficulty in classifying this slight, hardly audible, noise. Then came the booming cry of old Death Wing just above him. The sound was so hollow and terrifying that Pack's muscles jerked nervously despite himself. But still he did not rise.

Silence, then, and he knew that the ears of Death Wing were attuned to catch the slightest sound of any small creature which had been disturbed by the loud hunting cry. All of the harmless wilderness folk who went their small ways in the coverts knew that sound, and few possessed the nerve control necessary to stay motionless instead of darting for some point of safety nearby. As though in response, Pack heard that soft sound again, followed by a faint, slithering noise. Abruptly, then, he knew where the noise came from, although the maker of it was still a mystery to him.

It came from the other side of the log along which he lay! Something was there, something which knew he was lying quiet, probably asleep. Inch by inch, the unknown was creeping closer, and the slithering sound meant that it was starting up over the log!

Pack's hands tightened on the gun and his muscles tensed for the sudden roll which would carry him away from the dangerous log. His mind worked like lightning as he decided what his moves would be. He would roll away, jump to his feet and whip up his gun, all in the same motion, and the quickness of it would catch the unknown stalker off guard. His guess was that it was an old cougar, hungry and therefore dangerous if it believed it had him at a disadvantage; or it might even be a grizzly, likewise desperate by reason of poor hunting, which believed it could sneak up and hurl its body over the log before he could move. It was death in some form, and he dare not make a mistake in his calculations. But just as Pack decided what he would do, his eyes caught movement in the fir directly above him.

He saw the shadow which he knew to be old Death Wing suddenly detach itself from the depths of the fir. Then, before the trapper could move, he realized that the great bird was dropping—straight at him, it seemed! The broad pinions were set as the owl's body, in that steep glide, grew bigger magically. Frozen by astonishment, Pack seemed unable to move, until at the instant when it appeared that Death Wing would strike him in the face, he threw up one arm and covered his head.

There was a mighty swishing sound, a swirl of air as strong wings fanned it, a savage hissing like that of an angered snake. A curved beak snapped in Bill Pack's ear. Then there was a terrified scream from the other side of the log that brought the man upright.

As Pack jumped erect, gun ready, Death Wing pirouetted in air and

went beating hastily away from the spot, realizing that he had made a grievous mistake. But his movements were no quicker than Bill Pack's. For, as the trapper came to his feet the gleam of steel lashed out at him in the moonlight, and he ducked and flung his body at the dark shape which was too close to enable him to shoot. The knife blade flicked his cheek, but the next instant, dropping the gun, he managed to grip the attacker's right wrist. Both men went down, battling furiously. As they rolled over in the brush, Bill Pack felt the sting of the knife blade as his foe's hand twisted.

PACK flinched away from the blade, throwing the weight of his body on the other's side, and both rolled over again. Suddenly the knife-armed man screamed again, twitched convulsively, then went limp. Fearing a trick, Pack held him fast. Certain, at last, that the man wasn't faking, Pack lifted his head.

He saw the swarthy, twisted features of the Indian, Klawock. An instant later he knew why Klawock no longer struggled, why he lay there dead. The pressure of Pack's strong fingers had forced the Indian to let go the knife at last, and it must have fallen point upward, due to the weight of the handle. The keen blade had been accidentally driven into the Indian's back, when the two rolled over.

"Tried to kill me, and you got it yourself!" muttered Pack, breathing heavily from exertion. He was glad that it had happened that way, even though he had been fighting for his life; he wasn't a killer at heart. But it puzzled him that Klawock had failed in his cunningly planned attack. A moment later he understood.

Lying atop the log was Klawock's cap, that furry headdress made of beaver pelt. It was Death Wing who had unwittingly saved Bill Pack's life!

Up in his favorite tree the old owl had heard Klawock as the Indian, with subtle craft, had crept close to the log where the white man lay. Death Wing could not see Klawock because of the dense brush, but when the Indian lifted his fur-covered head ever so little above the log, the owl had struck instantly.

To Death Wing that fur cap must have looked like the body of some small animal crouching on the log. Accurately his talons had clashed through the cap, and the Indian, never seeing his attacker at all, must have thought it was one of the night devils of this *tamanawos* spot which had come to the white man's aid. His involuntary scream of terror had betrayed him.

Awed by the strange happenstance which had saved his life, Bill Pack started toward his cabin. Then he paused abruptly. From the depths of the swamp came the hooting of old Death Wing, still shaken at realization of the mistake he had made.

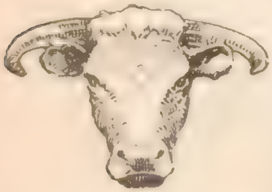
But this time Pack heard the weird call without resentment. Hereafter he wouldn't begrudge Death Wing food for those nestlings or himself, even though it was taken from his own traps. Bill Pack was not an ungrateful man, and he was ready to admit that his life—which he owed to Death Wing—was worth more to him than anything of which the owl might rob him in the future.

THE END.

RANGE SAVVY

by H. FREDRIC YOUNG

Packs of coyotes and wolves, even wild dogs and wild horses, have often caused consternation and trouble on ranches, but wild cows are less likely to be mischief makers. However, there are exceptions. "Old Salty," outlaw bull of the Black range and leader of a great herd of wild, destructive cattle near Hillsboro, New Mexico, was finally captured and killed, but his band continued to increase. Its depredations upon a four-hundred-thousand-acre ranch, grazing on range much needed by the domestic herds, started a real war to bring the situation under control. Not only did the outlaws steal forage, but they also lured away many animals from the regular herds.



Best results were obtained by the use of traps. These traps were made of strongly constructed corrals with V-shape gates flanked by pointed poles. The cattle entered these, but upon trying to get out, their horns were snared on the pointed poles. An effort was made to tame the animals thus trapped, without great success. Many horses and men were gored in this attempted taming of these wild and ferocious beasts, resulting in the necessity of shooting most of the wild herd which was captured.

One of the major problems of frontier days was to find suitable roofing material for homes and stock sheds. The roofs in most common usage were of dirt and were made by placing small poles across three ridge poles running lengthwise of the building. On this brush, reeds, and even grass, were placed and a covering of dirt a foot or more thick was shoveled on top. If this was done in the spring a coating of grass grew up before the heavy rains came; otherwise the builder had to put protective poles around the edges to keep his roof from being washed away.

In the pine country a common roof was one of bark. The bark was obtained by girdling a large pine tree about a foot above ground, and again about five feet higher, splitting a crack between the girdles and starting the bark peeling with a shovel blade or other blunt tool. With careful work a piece of bark half an inch thick and about five feet square was procured. It was soft, malleable, and fairly strong. The rafters were placed about a foot apart and the pieces of bark laid on and overlapped about six inches. If mineral pitch—asphalt—was available, a liberal coating was applied, making an ideal roof. Later on shake roofs appeared, to be followed by the more snug-fitting shingle.

Not to be denied its place among the labor-saving devices is the "mechanical" gold panner. While he idles in the shade, the up-to-the-minute prospector lets this device "wash" his gold for him. This ingenious mechanical device can be powered with a washing-machine motor, or even a small engine, and through a bellowslike attachment blows the dirt and gravel from even the finest dust. The daily cost of operation is negligible, far below the cost of the extra gold which can be panned. Users of the new-fangled machine assert that the old era of tedious panning by hand is gone.

Mr. Young will pay one dollar to anyone who sends him a usable item for RANGE SAVVY. Please send these items in care of Street & Smith, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. Be sure to inclose a three-cent stamp for subjects which are not available.

DRAGON ON THE DEVIL'S TAIL

BY MOJAVE LLOYD

UNTIL he saw old Rocky Blaine swing off the Kickapoo Trail and ride up the hill toward him that sizzling August afternoon, Feng Toy was probably the most contented human between Albuquerque and the Arizona line. He was warm. He was idle. His dragon was finished. And deep within the recesses of his

The fate of the Rolling B rode with Feng Toy but Toy's loco mule brought on disaster.

ancient stomach nestled half a tumblerful of raw red whiskey. But one look at the approaching owner of the Rolling B outfit instantly informed the venerable Chinaman that the peace wherein his celestial soul basked was about to be rudely disturbed. He sighed deeply.

Feng Toy was one of the landmarks of western New Mexico. He had appeared one day upon the Rolling B when old Rocky Blaine himself had been but a younker roping house cats with a length of clothesline. He had taken possession of the cook shack as though he had always owned it, and there he had stayed for fifty years. No man had any notion how old he was, nor where he came from. When asked about such things, Feng Toy would say gravely, "Wise man on long journey nevee look back."

Rocky Blaine kneed his salty Billy horse to a stop. On his lap he was carrying a two-gallon wooden keg. Balancing it on one of his great hands, he gave it a toss.

Feng Toy didn't seem to move—but he caught the keg. As gently as if he were handling an urn containing the ashes of all his honorable ancestors, he set the keg on end and sat down on it.

"Long days and a multitude of men children," he said gravely. Not by so much as a wink of his faded old yellow eyes did he reveal that he noticed the black eye and split lower lip that decorated the face of the crusty old boss of the Rolling B.

"Drink hearty!" Blaine rumbled. He bit at the ends of his grizzly mustache. "Where that come from," he spat, "there ain't no more."

As he spoke, old Rocky studied the impassive yellow countenance of the aged Chinaman with bloodshot eyes that held a savage glare. Twisting his massive bulk in the saddle, he scooped sweat from his forehead with a calloused finger and stared away over the sunburned hills to where the trail he had just ridden homeward was swallowed by the yawning mouth of Snake-eye Canyon.

For the time it took a sparrow hawk to swoop on a lizard, he watched the wind-built column of dust that had writhed and wavered day and night above the canyon's rim as long as he could remember, an ominous, black, wind-tortured plume of dust which Feng Toy had long ago named the Devil's Tail.

Passing on, the fierce old cattleman's gaze swept over the far-flung reaches of the vast Rolling B range lands, and came to rest on the cluster of buildings and corrals flanking the squat old dobe ranchhouse at the foot of the hill, the whole resting in peaceful serenity beneath the yellowing leaves of its grove of cottonwoods. As if to himself, Blaine rumbled, "It's the only home I've ever knowed." Then Feng Toy saw him swallow hard.

The shriveled old Chinaman stroked the six long chin hairs he called his "beard" and nodded understandingly. Except for certain misty memories of days long gone, boyhood days in a mud-walled village on the willow-bordered banks of the Hoang Ho, in far-away Kwengsi, he too could say the golden hills and sun-baked buildings of the old Rolling B were the only home he had ever known. He searched Rocky Blaine with wise old eyes, seeing much in little things.

There was a hole in the cowman's shapeless old hat. Where a suspender button was missing, he had carelessly made shift with a cut nail twisted through the cloth. One knee of his Levis showed a rent he hadn't bothered to have mended. That wasn't like old Rocky. It wasn't

like the old days. It was plain too that when he had ridden in to Kickapoo the day before to dispose of the fall beef roundup which Slats Grimm and Pete Pelky were holding over at Mud Turtle Spring, he had gone an another spree. It hadn't been like that in the old days, reflected Feng Toy sadly.

ALL such things dated from the day when Martha Blaine died four years before. The twinkling-eyed little old woman had marched shoulder to shoulder with Rocky down the hard years of a pioneer lifetime. When Martha Blaine drove half the night through a blizzard to help a neighbor woman bring one more child into the world, and caught pneumonia and died, some vital thing deep within old Rocky died, too. Feng Toy could see that.

He saw, too, did Feng Toy, that on this trip to town, the devils that always lay in wait for a man had contrived calamity. But asking questions was not Feng Toy's way. In his own good time, Rocky would speak. Right now he was watching the mouth of the Snake-eye, as though expecting every minute to see devils ride out of there.

It was Martha Blaine who had finally driven Feng Toy out of the cook shack. She declared it was sacrilegious that a human as old as Methuselah should still be routing out at four o'clock in the morning to bake biscuits. So, for several years now, Feng Toy had had nothing to do but sit in the sun and dream of the heavenly delights of his honorable ancestors—that, and one other thing.

He had chosen for himself the hottest spot on the whole Rolling B, the stony slope of the pasture up back of the hay barn. There, without a scrap of shade, he had built himself a low shanty about six feet square. To make extra sure his creaking old bones wouldn't get the shivers, he had roofed his shack with galvanized iron. Not a drop of water was there on that scorching slope. But water, except for cooking purposes, was something Feng Toy had always regarded with abysmal contempt.

On rare occasions the old Chinaman appeared in the cook shack, now presided over by his dutiful nephew, Hop Kai. He would stuff a little of this and that into a flour sack and with the sack over his bent old shoulders go pattering back up the hill again, his straw sandals making a soft slapping sound on the rocks. On the first day of every month, old Rocky brought him what he had enjoyed monthly for half a century, a two-gallon wooden keg of raw whiskey.

The "other thing" left in Feng Toy's life was kites. He was the most famous maker of kites in the entire Southwest. His cunning old hands fashioned kites of every size and shape and color, and made them do astounding things. Once, for the Kickapoo fiesta, he had built a tremendous kite in the form of a longhorned bull that went buck-jumping over the fascinated crowd with phosphorescent fire shooting from its mouth.

The delight of Feng Toy's days, the fondest hope of a lifetime, had been to fashion and send to his native village on the Hoang Ho the most beautiful and soul-chilling "Dragon" kite the eyes of mortal man had ever looked upon. And as he sat there on his keg in the sun, blinking up at old Rocky Blaine who in turn watched the mouth of Snake-eye Canyon, Feng Toy had the unspeakable satisfaction of knowing his

lovely Dragon was finished and safely hidden beneath the floor of his shack.

"She's gone!" rumbled old Rocky. He made a sweeping motion with the butt of his quirt. "Lock, stock and barrel—the old Rolling B's gone. You savvy?"

Feng Toy made a sucking sound with his toothless gums. "Savvy plenty good," he said. Which he didn't at all. How could the old Rolling B be gone? As well believe the Devil's Tail, looming to high heaven away there on the western horizon would suddenly turn into a rainbow.

Old Rocky's voice dropped to little more than a hoarse whisper. "But he won't get her, except over my dead body," he rasped. "I told the coyote that. I got drunk and tossed a bill of sale for the Rolling B herd into a stud game. Dink Donahoe held too many aces. But I was drunk. An' I was cold-decked. I seen it an' I told him so. I went for my gun, but some sidewinder knocked me stiff with a bottle." The old cowman gouged a savage knuckle into his injured eye, then continued:

"Donahoe says he'll be ridin' out here with some of his gun-slamming crew this evenin' to take possession of my herd. I warned him if he set foot on my range, I'd blow his brisket out through his backbone. You savvy, Toy?"

Feng Toy bobbed his shrunken old head till the black ribbon on his long queue danced against his crooked spine. Knowing old Rocky like he did, the answer to that one was easy. "Savvy plenty good," he clucked.

"But that ain't all, Toy," Rocky roared. "I likewise told that tinhorn of a Donahoe, if he *don't* show up here, I'm riding back to town this evenin' to smoke him out and make him cough up that bill of sale." He snapped at his mustache and shot his Billy horse away down the slope.

FENG TOY watched him hurl himself from the saddle in the graveled yard and go slamming into the house. His horse trotted toward the corral, shaking his head each time he stepped on a dragging rein. The ancient Chinaman bowed three times to his keg of whiskey, lifted it reverently in his skinny arms and scuttled into his shack.

When he reappeared in the doorway, he was clutching in his hand a bottle bearing a stained label covered with scrawled characters in Chinese brush writing. He held it up to the sunlight, squinting at it. It was half full of an oily brown liquid. Feng Toy secreted it within the folds of the long black cotton cloak in which he invariably wrapped his brittle bones to guard against catching cold whenever he journeyed abroad. After laying a piece of two-by-four on the ground, exactly touching both sides of the doorway, to keep the devils out while he was away, he gathered his cloak about his scrawny old legs and went pattering down the hill, his straw sandals slapping softly.

Feng Toy's ancient mind was a prey to dark thoughts. The spirit of peace which he worshiped in the form of a tiny teakwood god cuddled lovingly in his left hand was in sore danger of being utterly destroyed. If the beef herd went, it meant the ranch went, too. And for reasons dear to the kindly heart of Feng Toy, the Rolling B must be protected at all costs. It was like this, he reflected.

Old Rocky Blaine had a son. He was a fine, upstanding son with Blaine strength in his rugged features and the light of purpose in his eyes, blue like his mother's. Feng Toy

had been a cross between a second father and a nursemaid to that boy. Soon Ronnie would have finished with his doctor's course in the Eastern university, the name of which Feng Toy never could remember, and would return to practice medicine in Kickapoo. He would live, as any Blaine should, on the Rolling B, and raise a family. Thus the Rolling B would be forever guarded by generations of Blaines.

Feng Toy let his amber eyes rest fondly on the sun-mellowed old buildings of the great ranch and admitted to himself that this train of thought was not wholly unselfish. It was tinged with a hope long cherished in his innermost being—in this wise.

Due to the hatred of some species of devil which he supposed he must have offended in his youth, Feng Toy had been denied the heavenly boon of having a man child of his own. So ten years before, he had brought out from far-away Kwengsi, Hop Kai, the man child of his only sister, and trained his nephew painstakingly in the mysteries of presiding over the Rolling B cook shack. There Hop Kai now held forth.

All this meant two things to Feng Toy, formed a picture his inner eye had contemplated a thousand times for the peacefulness of his celestial soul. He could safely be buried on his sun-scorched hillside on the Rolling B, comforted by the knowledge that Hop Kai would be there to pay proper reverence to the sanctity of his uncle's honorable bones.

But now, thought Feng Toy bitterly, a shudder making his braided pigtail dance against his bent back, this cherished picture of his was threatened with destruction. Fear lent wings to his sandaled feet.

When he slid through the back door of the cook shack, his esteemed nephew was doing exactly what was to be expected—making onion soup for the boss. Always when old Rocky returned from Kickapoo with a wry face and a frazzled temper, he must have scalding onion soup. Feng Toy had counted on that.

Coming directly to what was on his mind, he intoned softly, "Wise man see debil, look other way. Go catchee stlick wood."

Hop Kai bowed respectfully and scuttled out the door. When he came back, with an armful of stove wood which he laid on the floor because the wood box was already full, Feng Toy was innocently stirring the onion soup with his right hand, and with his left replacing something within the folds of his shabby cloak. He ladled out a bowl of soup, passed it to Hop Kai and bobbed his green skullcap in the direction of the door. Hop Kai took the bowl and scuttled out.

To still the beating of his anxious heart while Hop Kai was absent, Feng Toy set himself to making pie crust. Six cups of flour, three teaspoons of sugar, cream of tartar, soda and salt were whisked into a wooden bowl as if by magic, all being measured by the instinct of half a century far more accurately than mere spoons and cups would have done. Feng Toy had sifted these ingredients together twice, and was adding cold spring water drop by drop, when Hop Kai returned and set the empty soup bowl on the sink. Feng Toy raised his bleached eyebrows.

"Bloss," remarked Hop Kai, "him get sleepy."

Feng Toy rinsed his hands and dried them on a flour sack. He spoke quietly to his nephew for a few minutes, telling him the tale of the ancient Manchu emperor who slept his entire life away beside a goldfish pond with a jug of wine for a pillow.

Then Feng Toy pattered away into the house.

WHEN he entered the great kitchen, he paused and bowed three times to the cast-iron cookstove where no fire had been lighted since Martha Blaine's death, then crossed the room on noiseless sandals. He peered into the silent living-room. Then he slipped his hands into the sleeves of his cloak and stood there with a trace of a satisfied smile wrinkling the dry yellow skin around his slitted eyes. Rocky Blaine was stretched comfortably in his big bullhide rocker before the empty fireplace, sound asleep.

Now, reflected Feng Toy, if only he was right in his calculations! If only the evil spirit of Dink Donahoe would be afraid to come! Feng Toy would keep old Rocky from riding to Kickapoo that evening to smoke the gambler out. He slid to the window commanding the Kickapoo trail, then stiffened as though a scorpion had stung him. His indrawn breath made a faint hissing sound.

Far away, barely distinguishable in the hazy distance, but most certainly dropping from the mouth of Snake-eye Canyon and heading for the Rolling B, were three black dots. The vicious Dink Donahoe and his hired gun slammers were on the way!

Feng Toy's thoughts rioted. Counting so surely on Donahoe's being afraid to come, he had done the worst thing possible—put old Rocky out of commission.

He grasped the rancher by the arm and shook him with all the strength in his frail old body. But Rocky Blaine only flopped his shaggy head sidewise. He was completely dead to the world. And, reflecting upon what he had poured into the onion soup, Feng Toy had a notion that for a considerable time to come, the "bloss" was likely to stay that way.

Shivering, he crouched down on his heels with his bent back supported against the wall. His celestial soul was dead.

The frowzy little bird in the dusty old cuckoo clock on the mantel popped out four times and roused the benumbed old Chinaman with its strident squawks. The very helplessness of his predicament drove Feng Toy into frantic action.

His shrill squeal summoned Hop Kai on the run. Together they skidded the heavy bullhide rocking chair into a bedroom, left the old man sound asleep, and locked the door. Five minutes later Feng Toy, astride the gaunt one-eyed mule he had ridden for twenty years, was shambling wildly toward Mud Turtle Spring, his pigtail and the skirts of his black cloak flapping in the evening breeze.

He was sure that Dink Donahoe, even though he likely knew the beef herd was being held at the spring, would ride first to the ranchhouse. Hop Kai had been instructed what to say—that the "bloss" was away, he didn't know where. Maybe before Donahoe could do any damage, Feng Toy could get back with Slats Grimm and Pete Pelky. It was his only hope. With the tiny teakwood image in one hand, and the reins and saddlehorn clutched in the other, he beat a tattoo against the ill-tempered old mule's ribs with sandaled heels.

SLATS GRIMM glanced up from the pan of frying bacon he was holding over the supper fire and grinned broadly at the apparition that drew rein beside him. Pete Pelky stepped from the rickety wagon they were using for a camp and chucked the coffeepot into the coals, then straightened with an

amused gleam in his eye.

"Slats," he said soberly, "if something ain't done *pronto,* ever' last steer we're holdin' will go on a stampede. You want I should toss yonder pigtailed scarecrow in the spring—mebbe mule an' all?"

But something in the appearance of the old Chinaman wiped all the amusement from Slats Grimm's leathery face. The twinkle left his reckless eyes. With the skillet full of bacon still in his hand, he straightened his long spine with a snap.

And by the time Feng Toy had told him what had happened, the lanky ramrod's weathered features were set in hard lines. He started to say something to Pete Pelky, but bit off the words and pivoted on his heels.

Three riders came pelting down the trail Feng Toy had ridden. Apparently they had swung wide of the house. They reined their broncos in roughly. Icy fingers which Feng Toy thought must be those of some Cantonese devil froze his warped backbone.

Try as he would, Feng Toy could not take his eyes from the evil face of the notorious Dink Donahoe. He seemed actually to be hynotized. It was a sharp, cruel face, pale from exposure to nothing stronger than artificial light. Thin, cruel lips were set in a perpetual smile with no more humor in it than there was in the curve of a scorpion's tail. His prominent eyes were of a greenish cast, set in a stare as unwinking as a snake's.

The men flanking him were two of his hired gun dogs whose names Feng Toy was ignorant of, but whose sinister reputation was ample. The one on Donahoe's left was lean as a lizard. The other was shaped like a pork barrel.

Donahoe smiled woodenly at Slats Grimm and slid his tongue over his lips. His glassy eyes caught the glint of the setting sun on the two

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carbines leaning against the bed of the wagon about forty feet away. Hanging over a corner of the tail gate were two gun belts with a pair of six-shooters in tilted holsters. The gambler's crooked smile twisted his thin mouth into the shape of a crescent.

"Nice evening, ain't it?" he remarked.

Feng Toy saw the little spiderwebs of lines framing Slats Grimm's eyes harden in place till they stood out. He had seen that before, and got chills when he thought of what generally happened at such times.

"She *was* a nice evenin'," the ramrod said evenly, "till you come along. *Now*, she smells strong of skunk."

Dink Donahoe slid a white hand beneath the lapel of his broadcloth coat, gray now with alkali dust, and slipped out a folded paper which he held between two steady fingers while he whipped a glance at the fat man beside him, then at the skinny one on the other side.

"Boys," he said, and nothing but a faint vibration in his smooth voice revealed that he was raging inside, "if he don't hand this paper back, cut loose."

He gigged his nervous sorrel a step nearer to Grimm and extended the paper. "Let's look at it this way," he said. "That's a valid bill of sale for the Rolling B beef herd. We've come for the stuff. You aim to show sense?"

The long-geared foreman didn't even bother to reach for the paper. And although he spat with apparent carelessness, the saliva splashed resoundingly against Donahoe's hand-tooled boot.

WHITE lines framed the gambler's mouth. He put the paper back in the inside pocket of his coat.

Slats Grimm glanced briefly at Pete Pelky, then turned and pointed with the skillet in such a direction that it swiveled the heads of the three riders almost clear around to follow the line of his outstretched arm.

"The beef gather's up there in the meadow," he said pleasantly, "beyond that row of cottonwoods." His voice went suddenly very soft. "Try and take it!"

The three heads snapped back. Donahoe muttered a curse and whipped a hide-out gun from a shoulder holster. His two companions clawed for their hips. Pete Pelky was halfway to the carbines. Donahoe cracked down, but the fat gent got in his way. Slats Grimm swept his arm around like a sail on a windmill. The sizzling grease and bacon in the skillet smacked into the riders' faces and splattered over the horses' heads. All three horses went skyward. Then Grimm hurled the skillet in Donahoe's face.

Feng Toy was chattering shrill prayers to heathen Chinese deities. His mule was chasing its tail.

From there on, all was howling confusion in Feng Toy's mind. Long afterward, when peace had descended once more upon his tortured soul, he tried to fit events together into logical order. Most of it he never could get straight. But one day, over a cup of coffee that had a suspicious grayish foam on it, he did manage to tell Hop Kai this much:

Just as Pete Pelky struck the wagon, a bullet struck him. As he fell, he hurled one of the gun belts. Grimm caught it. Then over the ridge came a bellowing avalanche in the form of old Rocky Blaine on a boogered buckskin.

Boiling with fury, and still woozy from the generous dose of tincture of opium Feng Toy had given him

in his soup, old Rocky came a-smoking. That, as Feng Toy later gravely explained to the awestruck Hop Kai, would have been a visitation from the gods, except for one regrettable circumstance. A slug from Donahoe's stingy gun dumped the "bloss" clean out of his saddle.

At that point, Feng Toy's evil-natured old mule had lit out in the general direction of Arizona. Feng Toy went along, too—for eight or ten jumps. Then he and the mule parted company. Feng Toy, swaddled in his shabby black cloak, like a sack of abandoned old bones, lay where his head collided with a rock.

He woke up to find a slice of moon risen above the jagged eastern ridges and shining in his face. The first thought penetrating his muddled brain was that he had lost his treasured little teakwood god. Panic filled his celestial soul. Using the rock for a leverage, he struggled to his feet. Below him, in the white moonlight, he saw a shadowy figure moving around the wagon. Calling upon all his strength, he dragged his aching old bones down there.

The moving figure was Pete Pelky. He had part of his pants cut away and a hole in the calf of his leg bound up with a dirty dish towel. Stretched on the ground lay Rocky Blaine and Slats Grimm, both apparently lifeless. Pelky had bound their wounds as best he could and made crude pillows for them out of rolled blankets. He told Feng Toy that Donahoe and his crew had left all three for dead, taken their guns and gone after the beef herd.

"Right now," Pete said gloomily, "they'll have the herd on the move toward the Snake-eye. By daybreak, they'll be in the Kickapoo shippin' pens. There ain't but one hope for the old Rollin' R—that the herd'll get stampeded. And there ain't a thing on the cards to stampede 'em. If you was—" Abruptly he wrenched around on his good leg.

Over the ridge, straddle of an old skewbald yard mare, came Hop Kai. His flour-sack apron was tucked up around his belly. His slanted eyes were wide with terror. Pete Pelky got an idea. As the mare went by, he grabbed her hackamore. Hop Kai slid off. Pelky hauled himself painfully into the saddle.

"You two stand guard here," he ordered. "I'm ridin' for Kickapoo to fetch the sawbones." He yanked the mare around and spurred her into a lope.

MISERABLY Feng Toy hunkered down with his back snuggled between two spokes of a wagon wheel. His world had been blown to shreds. His placid soul was filled with agony. The Rolling R was lost. So was Feng Toy's chosen burial ground. Never would he lie peacefully on the sun-blistered hill behind the hay barn, with the man child of his sister to ward off devils by paying due respect to his honorable bones. He stroked his six chin whiskers and sighed deeply. If only he hadn't lost his precious little teakwood god.

But he hadn't! Hop Kai spied the tiny image lying in the dust. He picked it up reverently, bowed, and handed it to his uncle.

Feng Toy bobbed to his feet and astounded Hop Kai with the gleam in his faded old eyes. Like an explosion of light it had come to him what he must do. The little teakwood god had spoken. It was the voice of all the ancient gods that had brooded for ages along the Hoang Ho. To Hop Kai's utter consternation, Feng Toy whisked around and

scuttled away, his sandals flapping grotesquely.

In the ghostly light of the false dawn a pair of slitted eyes glimpsed the vast Rolling B herd pinching into the mouth of Snake-eye Canyon. Pointing the herd rode a fat gent singing, "Trail Along, Little Dogies" in a cracked barroom tenor. Behind him the steers massed, spooky and bawling.

The tossing horns made clashing music. Up from the churning hoofs rose clouds of powdery alkali that floated upward between the canyon's sheer walls to join the towering swirl of dust Feng Toy had long ago named the Devil's Tail. Bringing up the drag, urging the sullen cattle deeper into the canyon with yells and quirts, rode Dink Donahoe and his corpselike segundo.

It was about midway of the canyon that it happened.

Seepage from a spring welling up from the base of the south wall made a bog of the trail at about the center of the two-mile canyon. Directly above there hung the swirling tip of the Devil's Tail, moaning and seething into the upper reaches of the black sky.

At the edge of the bog, the big, mottled red lead steer stopped. His head swayed from side to side. His eyes rolled till the whites glistened. He rumbled deep down in his gaunt chest, then blew a hoarse blast from his flaring nostrils. Like fire through prairie grass, tension went running back through the herd. Every pair of horns rose. Every wild eye dilated. And as though dimly conscious that disaster was coming, the three riders reined in and froze in their saddles.

But none of them, in his wildest imaginings, could have foreseen that a flaming dragon was to be tied to the Devil's Tail.

IT came with the nerve-shattering suddenness of a summer thunderclap. From a niche in the north wall, not fifty feet from the muzzle of the mottled red lead steer, the dragon rose with an ominous swish—a hideous, crimson-bodied monster with a multitude of waving arms like the streaming tentacles of an octopus.

The barrel-shaped red body alone must have been fully twenty feet in diameter. With its contorted arms and legs, it choked the canyon from wall to wall, scraping its scaly claws against the rocks, and dragging its sluggish tail in the ooze of the bog. But that wasn't the worst of it.

It was the head of the loathsome thing that struck terror to the hearts of the rigid riders, that transformed that herd of boogered steers into a murderous maelstrom of long-horned maniacs.

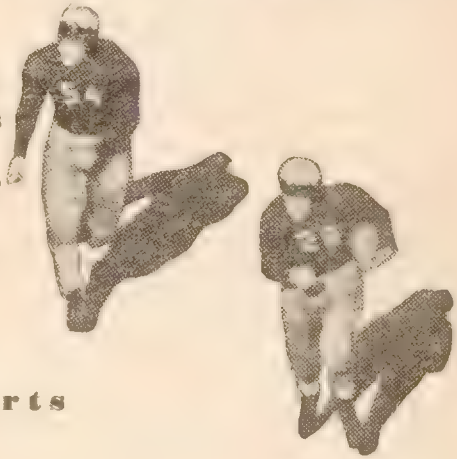
There in the ghostly darkness of the canyon, with the twisting Devil's Tail moaning eerily in the black sky, that menacing head looked as big as a grizzly bear. From its bulging eyes crept tongues of blue flame. Out of its cavernous jaws foamed billows of frothing fire. And with a swish and a moan as the wind caught it, the whole horrible monster swooped low over the heads of the steers and soared upward. Then, as though hooked to the tip of the Devil's Tail, it went flaming and skipping skyward.

What happened after that made the earth tremble. Fourteen hundred head of murder-on-the-hoof spewed from the mouth of the Snake-eye as though shot from a volcano. Whatever went down, stayed down, ground to a pulp and hammered into the canyon's rocky bed.

High on the canyon's north rim,

Continued on page 98

sensational!



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Continued from page 96

the black-cloaked figure of a bent old Chinaman strove manfully to pull earthward again the precious dragon he had pulled up from the canyon floor till it was seized by the wind.

It was shortly after noon the following day that Feng Toy sat humped on an empty keg beside his shanty door and again watched old Rocky Blaine come racking slowly up the slope on his salty Billy horse. Old Rocky rode stiffly. Around his midriff was a wide bandage as tight as a corset. His shaggy head was bandaged till it looked as if he had traded his sombrero for a turban. His left eye was purple and swollen the size of a gourd. He reined in and snapped at the ends of his grizzled mustache.

"You pigtailed old chuckawalla!" he rumbled. "What in the name of all the heathen hop toads have you been up to?"

Feng Toy stroked his six chin whiskers contentedly. He was warm. He was idle. His precious dragon was safe. And deep within the uttermost reaches of his ancient belly reposed an entire tumblerful of raw red whiskey.

"When me and Slats come alive last night," old Rocky rasped, "it looked to us like Snake-eye Canyon had turned into Mount Vesuvrikus. By the time half the men in the county got there, there wasn't nothing left of Dink Donahoe and his coyotes but a stink and a belt buckle. I reckon that bill of sale Donahoe was totin' wouldn't make a fair-sized didee for a gnat."

A hopeful light dawned in the aged cook's faded yellow eyes. "Bloss go along Kickaploo?"

"Got to," rumbled old Blaine. "Got to hire me a crew of cow wranglers to gather up steers all the way from here to the Rio Grande." He shot a suspicious glance from his one good eye. "You mean to tell me," he roared, "you're settin' on an empty keg?"

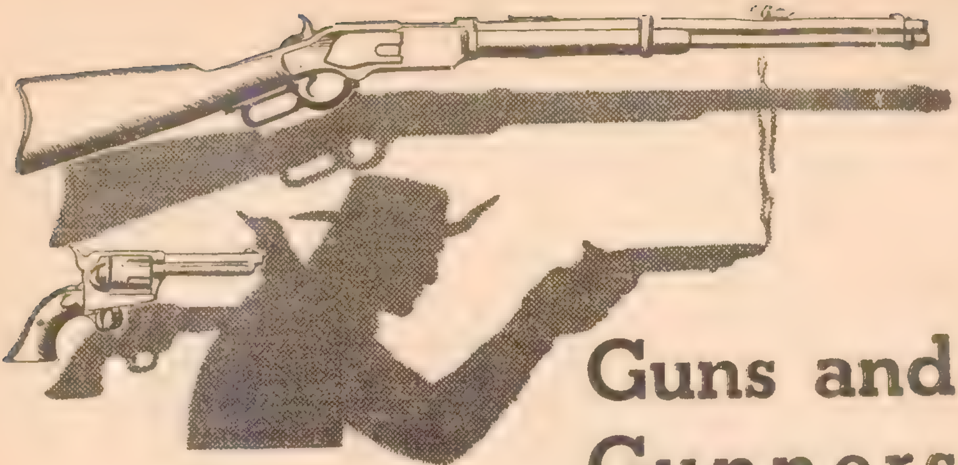
Feng Toy made a clucking sound with his toothless old gums. His long queue swayed like a forlorn pendulum.

"On but one condition," old Rocky laid down the law, "will I fetch you a fresh keg of that stuff you been embalmin' your hide in ever since I was a boy. You're goin' to tell me what happened. What *did* you do?"

The old Chinaman extended his left arm and slowly opened his hand. On his shriveled palm lay the tiny teakwood god, his fat belly glistening in the sun.

"Littlee Chinee," intoned Feng Toy with a grave smile, "him velly heavy dlinker!"

THE END.



Guns and Gunners

By PHIL SHARPE

One of the most interesting forms of inquiry concerning one-hand guns —pistols and revolvers—is in their use as defense weapons.

Very definitely the revolver, or automatic pistol, can be classified in one of two groups—the working gun and the target gun. The working gun invariably includes that particular breed of hand gun, having fixed or nonadjustable sights. The target gun is more of a precision weapon equipped with adjustable sights and designed exclusively for the job of making little holes in paper targets.

Users of fixed-sight guns utilize them mostly for hunting purposes as side arms, for personal defense, and for home defense. To a police officer, for instance, the firearms he carries might definitely be classified under the heading of "tools." The same might also be said of the old-time Western gunman.

Fiction stories for generations have failed to bring out the real reason for the use of big guns by the old-time Westerners. They have also failed to indicate why black powder was always so popular.

In this respect, I have talked with a few survivors of the old school who lived by and with guns. You hear two different titles for these men, unfortunately used rather indiscriminately. They are frequently called gunmen or gun fighters. The true understanding of the real Westerner as a gun fighter was on the side of law and order, whereas the gunman was usually the outlaw.

One of these old-timers told me a few years ago that modern smokeless powders, despite their effectiveness, would never replace the old black powder in gun fighting. He pointed out that most of the stories concerning the power and accuracy of fire of these old-timers were just plain propaganda. It was necessary for a man to build a good reputation and he did his best through bragging and through the assistance of the particular group of friends he accumulated to spread the impression that he was lightning on the draw and deadly in his aim.

He also tried with reasonable success to give the impression that he did not need to aim, that he had that peculiar gift of gun pointing so that he could fire in any position with

deadly results. This was the early form of life insurance. One never attacks an opponent unless he is reasonably sure of the outcome.

This old-timer pointed out an interesting gun battle between two notorious characters. At a range of less than twenty feet, one man pulled his old Colt .45 and let drive at the other, missing cleanly. The other returned the fire and in short order both guns were emptied at a range of not exceeding thirty feet as they backed away from each other. When the smoke of battle cleared, neither one had been harmed. I pointed out that I would consider this to be poor shooting.

"Did you ever look into the muzzle of a .45?" the old-timer countered. "It looks like the top of a factory chimney, particularly when it is headed your way and threatening death. Also, this black powder had a tremendous blast of smoke and flame. The concussion is terrific. If you managed to get the first shot off, it was quite possible that your opponent would miss his shot since he could not stand that blast of your gun in his face."

On a protected rifle range I have on many occasions accidentally stood somewhat in front of a shooter. I was safe since the muzzle of the gun was carefully controlled and headed past me and a few feet off to one side. I never held such a position very long, however, due to the blast of that gun which caused me to seek more comfortable territory.

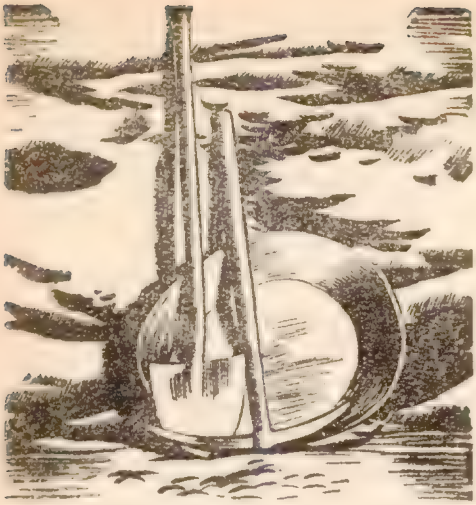
I also have shot many black-powder loads of various kinds, from .22s up to and including many of the old .45s. The belch of flame, the concussion and the deep roar would very definitely be disconcerting to anyone in the general vicinity of the receiving end. No wonder the opponent in returning the fire usually missed.

Gun size is of extreme importance. The tiny .22, if the bullet is placed properly, can be just as deadly as the .45, but the average trained police officer, should a crook pull a .22 on him would probably take a chance and attempt to disarm said crook. He wouldn't be much afraid of that tiny toy the crook held in his hand. But let a police officer look at a big gun pointed in his direction and the psychological reaction would be to do exactly as the man behind the gun says.

Police, in knowing this, are gradually getting away from small guns and going for the bigger ones. There is something terrifying about a .38 Special heavy-framed police revolver having a short, two-inch barrel. Many detectives' guns are built along these lines, since the short barrel enables a man to carry a big gun properly concealed in his clothes and the stubby weapon is much easier to handle than the long-barreled jobs. The short barrel makes the gun look even larger.

Again, the big-bore gun, with its tremendous blast, is very effective for defense work. Furthermore, the large-caliber, heavy bullet gives a much greater shocking blow than the light-weight bullets used in .22 and .32-caliber arms.

This department has been designed to be of practical service to those who are interested in guns. Mr. Sharpe will gladly answer any question you may have concerning firearms. Just address your inquiries to Phil Sharpe, Guns and Gunners Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y. *Be sure you print your name clearly and inclose a three-cent stamp for your reply. Do not send a return envelope.*



Mines and Mining

By J. A. THOMPSON

Gold Prospecting is as natural to southern California as are its sunny days and famed year-around climate. Even from the beautiful coast resort city of San Diego it is only necessary to go back about forty-five or fifty miles high into the rugged Peninsular Mountain range to find yourself at the edge of an active gold-mining and gold-prospecting country.

"I am planning on spending this coming winter in San Diego, California," writes B. M. K., of Portland, Oregon. "From a strictly amateur standpoint I am interested in prospecting for gold ores, and seeing how others actually mine the stuff. Is there any section close to San Diego where I might have an opportunity to gratify my bent in this direction? I will be driving down from Portland and will have a good car for transportation."

Fine. The car will come in very handy. After you get settled, and are ready to visit some gold country, stow a supply of food in the car. Take along your blankets and camping gear if you intend to do any outdoor camping. Put on good serviceable outdoor clothes, which should include stout hiking boots and a warm sweater or leather jacket. Early morning and nights are apt to have a chill crispness in the air, even in southern California.

Then all you have to do is pick up Route 80 in the heart of town and follow it east into the high country. Route 80 is the paved highway that leads back over the mountains and down across the desert via El Centro and the Imperial Valley to Yuma, Arizona. The road leads upward. It continues to climb even after you reach the plateau surface that starts at an altitude of about fifteen hundred feet and rises to four thousand feet above sea level at McCains Plateau. This highland region, some thirty to fifty miles wide, is cut by many canyons and gorges, ranging from five hundred to fifteen hundred feet deep.

Just west of Descanso, approximately thirty-five miles out of San Diego, you come to one of the first of the gold mines—the Descanso Mine which consists of a series of roughly parallel gold-bearing quartz veins and some fairly extensive workings. In the ore in this mine free gold (the real stuff) is associated with fool's gold (iron pyrites) and some lead sulphide. Which goes to prove that though fool's gold itself may be and often is a misleading disappointment, ore in which it is prevalent should nevertheless be carefully checked and tested. *Sometimes* it carries with it appreciable amounts of the genuine article either as free gold, a separate constituent of the ore, or possibly locked in the brassy iron pyrites itself.

On past Descanso four to six miles north and northeast of the Pine Valley post office in the Deer Park and Laguna mining districts you can find more than a dozen gold mines, prospects and prospect holes scattered in the mountains. A paved road which runs by the Laguna Recreation area leads off Highway 80 into this section. The gold-bearing quartz veins here are of the steep-dipping variety and run from one to ten feet wide. From a geological viewpoint the most likely places to do some prospecting for gold veins in this area are said to be in those sections where granites and mixed rocks prevail.

Back to the main highway and still farther east, gold prospecting has been carried on and some mines located close to the Mexican border to the south of Jacumba. From the crest of the Jacumba mountains down to the desert floor on the eastern side of the range the descent is sharp and spectacular, embracing a drop of three thousand feet in between five and six miles.

If you are interested in still more gold sections, and willing to go a hundred miles farther afield, whip your car down the mountains and east through El Centro. Then on past Grays Wells until you come to a gravel road that turns north to Ogilby. About four miles northeast of Ogilby the arid, canyon-cut, rock blocks of the Cargo Muchacho Mountains lift above the sandy desert floor. When you reach the Cargo Muchachos you will find yourself in a southern California mining district that has been very active during recent years, perhaps one of the most active gold-mining districts in Imperial County.

You will also be close to some of the most productive dry-washing placer-gold deposits in southern California—Imperial County's Mesquite, Picacho and Pothole placers. Well over two million dollars' worth of gold is estimated to have been won from the Pothole placers alone. At times in the past, as many as four and five hundred Mexicans have dry-washed them for their gold. These placers are situated about ten miles northeast of Yuma, and several miles west of Laguna Dam. The Mesquite placers are six miles north of Ogilby in the area east toward the Chocolate Mountains. The third of these closely related placer districts, the Picacho deposits, extend roughly six miles in an east-west direction from a point thirty miles north of Yuma and from two to five miles south of the Colorado River. A lot of dry-washing has been done in this area, notably along the hillsides and in the gulches on the west side of Carissa Wash. Good values have been obtained in many cases.

Take in as much of this mining country and as many of these gold districts as you have time for, B. M. K. Watch the other fellow mine. Do some gold prospecting yourself. And it is quite likely that before you point your car west and head back to San Diego you will have lost your "amateur" standing.

● We desire to be of real help to our readers. If there is anything you want to know about mining or prospecting, a letter inclosing a stamped and self-addressed envelope sent to J. A. Thompson, care of Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., will bring a prompt authoritative personal reply.

Letters unaccompanied by a return envelope will be published in the order in which they are received. But as space is limited, please keep such letters as brief as possible.

The Hollow Tree

By HELEN RIVERS

The Christmas time is here again and to all the faithful friends of the Hollow Tree far and near, Miss Rivers sends the season's greetings and best wishes for a very Happy New Year.

Tulula collects road maps—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am a constant reader of Western Story and would like some Pen Pals between fifteen and twenty-seven years of age. I am fifteen years old and am full of fun at all times. My hobbies are collecting match cover tops, post-card views, road maps from different States and countries, and photographs. I like all sports. I'll try to answer all letters and will exchange snapshots. Come on, all you girls and boys, and fill my mailbox.—Tulula Jackson, Route No. 2, Temple, Texas

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From Washington comes this plea—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am eighteen years old and would like to have some Pen Pals. I enjoy roller skating, dancing and some outdoor sports. I promise to exchange snapshots and answer all letters, so come, one and all, and drop me a line.—Reuben Seder, c/o James Rees, Castle Rock, Washington

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Vivian builds model airplanes—

Dear Miss Rivers:

May another Canadian join the Hollow Tree? I would like to hear from boys and girls between sixteen and thirty who are interested in exchanging stamps and in model airplane building. I'll be glad to hear from any others who might like to write me and will try to answer all letters and exchange snapshots.—Vivian Pierce, Meota, Saskatchewan, Canada

---

Write to this CCC boy—

Dear Miss Rivers:

How's chances for a lonely CCC boy joining up with your outfit? Our camp is working on an extensive logging project and I can promise you some very interesting letters about it. Come on, everybody, and fill my mailbox.—Jack Jackson, Company 919, Camp Hot Creek, Hot Creek, California

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Paging Mrs. Bert Ross—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Years ago I made many Pen Pals through your kindness. Some of these friends I no longer hear from, and since I have time on my hands and love to write and receive letters, I'd like you to print this request for me. I'm forty-seven years old and like to fish and enjoy other outdoor sports. I would very much like to hear from Mrs. Bert Ross. The last time she wrote she was on her way to California. I've written to her, but my letters were returned. Here's hoping for lots of mail.—Dolly Hindes, 1420 24th Street, Rockford, Illinois

---

Souvenirs promised by these two soldiers—

Dear Miss Rivers:

Any room in the Hollow Tree for a couple of soldiers in Uncle Sam's air corps? Puerto Rico isn't very big, but there's lots to tell about it and we guarantee long and interesting answers to every letter. We are both six-footers, ardent photography fans and would be more than glad to exchange pictures with anyone. To the first ten who drop us a line, we promise a picture and a souvenir of Puerto Rico. Come one, come all, any age, and drop the two of us a line.—Bob Meador and Herman Rietz, P. O. Box 46, San Antonio, Puerto Rico

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This brief plea comes from Iowa—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I would like to have girls and boys from all over write to me. I am sixteen years old and like to ride horseback. I collect stamps as a hobby, like to dance and have always been interested in traveling. Come on, you Pen Pals, and write to me.—Joan Resseguil, 1706 Grand Avenue, Spencer, Iowa

---

Joan will tell you about Australia—

Dear Miss Rivers:

I am writing you in the hopes that I may find some Pen Pals from all over the world. I am eighteen years old and live in the beautiful,

sunny State of Queensland. I would be only too pleased to exchange information about our beautiful country and also post cards showing various interesting studies of my country and its inhabitants. I love all kinds of sports, especially fishing and hiking.—Joan Sunderland, Caping Siding, Via Prosperpine, Queensland, Australia

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Prospecting is their chief interest—

Dear Miss Rivers:
We are interested in hearing from young married couples who are interested in prospecting. I am thirty years old and my wife is twenty-one. I have prospected in northern California and Oregon and would like to go back there. Here's hoping we hear from some of you folks interested in prospecting.—Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Lent, Box 541, Billerica, Massachusetts

---

Kenneth will answer all letters—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am twenty years old and would like to have some Pen Pals. I am interested in all sports and have traveled a great deal. Would be more than willing to exchange a tale or two from one and all. Everyone is welcome and all letters will be answered.—Kenneth Thompson, 9 Deer Street, Portsmouth, New Hampshire

---

Don't overlook this junior member—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like some Pen Pals. I am fifteen years old and my favorite pastimes are reading, drawing and playing basketball. I would like to exchange snapshots. Write soon.—Anna Bell Criss, 416 6th Avenue, Largo, Florida

---

Ervin lives in the ranching country—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a boy of seventeen and this is my first letters to the good old Tree. I would like some Pen Pals from all over the world. I'm collecting post cards and snapshots. I live in the sheep-ranching country and can tell you some interesting things about ranch life. So everybody write and give me a chance.—Ervin West, Moline, Texas

---

Mildred is interested in Westerners—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I enjoy reading Western stories and would like to hear from some Pen Pals. I am fifteen years old and my favorite sports are hiking, camping and skating. I would like to hear from boys and girls from any Western State. I will exchange snapshots and answer all letters I receive. I'll be waiting to hear from some new friends.—Mildred Shepard, R. D. No. 1, Stittville, New York

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Write to this shut-in—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am thirty-three years old and confined to bed and will be there for a while yet. I would appreciate letters from all over the world and promise to answer each one. I traveled extensively before ill health overtook me.—Ed McHugh, State Sanatorium, Hamburg, Pennsylvania

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And here are three more musketeers—

Dear Miss Rivers:
We are three musketeers from Illinois. Ardis is sixteen and Kathryn and Jerria are fifteen. We are anxious to hear from Pen Pals between fourteen and twenty-five from all over the world. We promise to send snapshots to the first six Pals who write, so come on, boys and girls, and answer this lonely call.—Ardis and Jerria Shearer, and Kathryn Grimes, Route No. 1, Tampico, Illinois

---

Don't disappoint Melvin—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like to see my letter in the Hollow Tree. I have written to several whose letters were published and have not received an answer. I will not disappoint those who write to me. I am seventeen years old and like to travel. I wish to hear from girls and boys between fifteen and seventeen.—Melvin Gage, CCC Company 1837, Kingman, Arizona

---

Francis is looking for a partner—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been a constant reader of Western Story for about ten years and don't believe I have ever missed a copy. This is my first attempt to have a letter printed and I only hope I make the grade. I am thirty-two years old, have worked in hotels and restaurants all my life. My work has carried me all over the East and I have never made any friends to speak of. I am looking for a partner to go in with me in starting a small eating place. Will some of you readers please write to me and see if we can get together? I am sure it will mean a lot to both of us.—Francis Fournier, 350 Bay Street, Fall River, Massachusetts

---

Here's another junior member of The Tree—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I am a fourteen-year-old girl looking for Pen Pals from all over the world between thirteen and seventeen years of age. I am interested in collecting stamps and pictures. I'll exchange small gifts and promise to answer every letter I get, and here's hoping I get many replies.—Vera Mae Husser, 112 Union Avenue, Oakdale, Pennsylvania

---

Wanted: Friends in Illinois—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I would like to make some Pen Pals living in Chicago, Illinois, or other parts of the State because I am going there for electrical training and would like to have some friends. However, anyone who wishes to write me is welcome. I am twenty years old.—Tom Echigo, Pleasanton, Texas

---

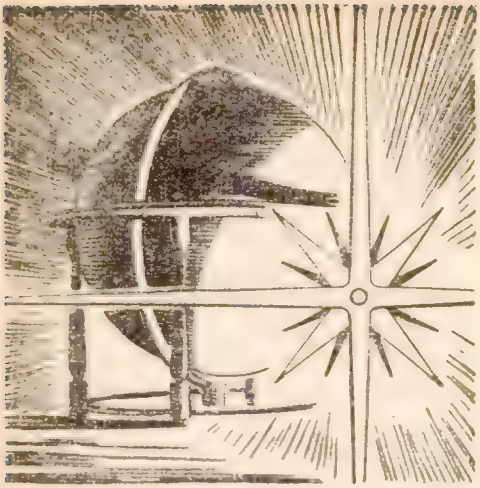
Calling Pals around the fifty mark—

Dear Miss Rivers:
I have been reading Western Story for over twenty years and it has helped pass many hours for me. I would like to have a few Pen Pals around my age, fifty-two.—Verna Bliss, Box 108, Limon, Colorado

---

Here's a "sister act"—

Dear Miss Rivers:
My sister Phyllis and I enjoy your page very much so we're sending in our plea for Pen Pals and hope all who read it will answer. I am nineteen and enjoy sports and so does Phyllis. We promise to answer all letters and will exchange photos and post cards with all who are interested.—Edna and Phyllis Hewitson, P. O. Box 70, Rosedale, Alberta, Canada



Where to go and how to get there

By JOHN NORTH

THOSE who took early advantage of the opportunities to homestead in Alaska are already reaping the rewards of their courage and their foresight. Alaska is booming. Partly as a result of its natural growth, partly because of the new defense measures that call for extensive army and navy bases in Alaska, thousands of new residents are flocking to this northern frontier territory.

These newcomers swelling the population of Fairbanks where the army is building an air base and of Anchorage, the new army headquarters, have to be fed. Similar conditions exist at Seward and Kodiak where the navy is building air bases. As best they can those who have already cleared and established their homesteads are providing these expanding cities with staple fresh vegetables, with beef, pork and dairy and poultry products. Yet millions of dollars' worth of these essential foodstuff commodities are still imported annually from the States.

There is need for more homesteaders. Plenty of room for them. In the agricultural region known as the Tanana Valley alone there are some seven thousand square miles comprising almost four and a half million acres of bottom land and rich bench land. Much of this land is eminently homesteadable. To date only a small fraction of it has been taken up.

"How about homesteading in the Tanana Valley section of Alaska?" J. K., of Montgomery, asked us recently, his letter only one of the many received on this selfsame subject. "Do you really believe there is opportunity in Alaska today? If so, any information on this will be appreciated. How cold do the winters get in the Tanana Valley?"

J. K., there is no doubt in our mind at all but what Alaska offers the earnest settler, unafraid of hard work and hardships, a world of opportunity right now. But the country is not for the indolent, nor for the man who has gone soft, and flabby and lack-luster in spirit. Though its cities have all the modern trimmings, Alaska is still, as far as most of the country is concerned, in the pioneer stage. It takes men, and their families, with true pioneer blood in their veins to settle it. That means individuals who have the courage, the ambition to overcome the ob-

Mr. North will be glad to send you detailed information about homesteading in Alaska. **Write him in care of this magazine, inclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope for his reply.**

stacles that always arise when someone tries to do something worth while, especially when it is new and different, and difficult.

There is no use kidding yourself about the climate of Alaskan winters up in the Tanana Valley section. The thermometer may go down to sixty below zero. The average for December and January ranges from about zero to twenty below. On the other hand mere temperature figures don't tell the whole story. The winters are surprisingly healthful and invigorating with an almost tonic quality in the crisp, clear air.

The frost-free period in the Tanana Valley extends from about May 20th to September 5th, roughly the same as in northern New England. But during the growing season in the Tanana Valley the days are incredibly long. For instance on July 1st the sun rises about 1:30 a. m. and sets about 10:30 p. m. Those long hours of sun warmth grow things with amazing rapidity. During June, July and parts of May and August, twilight is virtually continuous throughout the short night.

The rich soils of the valley have a physical constitution that is remarkably adapted to the absorption and retention of rain. Most of the land is hillside or old river bottom. As a rule, hillside acres with a southern exposure are best for farming. Crops on them mature earlier than do those on the river bottom lands though the latter yield excellent crops of forage.

There is timber that can be used for building purposes in much of the Tanana Valley area. Lumber mills are already established. Spruce grows well and trees eighteen inches or more in diameter near the butt are common in many places. Stands of birch are also found.

Potatoes, hay, dairying, vegetables and grain are the most important agricultural products of the Tanana Valley, and in that order. Among grain crops, spring wheat of the extra early maturing varieties is successfully grown. Oats are dependable, bringing in Alaska in the past prices that range from one dollar and twenty cents to one dollar and fifty-five cents per bushel with a field yield of from thirty-five to eighty bushels an acre.

Potatoes are one of the oldest staple vegetables grown in that section, the output being marketed not only locally in Fairbanks and other nearby towns but also extending to the gold-mining camps on the various creeks as well as those on the Tanana and Yukon rivers that are reached by river steamers out of Nanana. Six to eight tons an acre are usually produced on new ground. The American Wonder and Irish Cobbler are good growing varieties for this section.

And remember that, although admittedly the cost of living in Alaska is somewhat higher (it always is in pioneer districts) than in the States, this is offset by the higher prices farmers in Alaska receive for their Alaska-grown products.

● We aim to give practical help to readers. Mr. North will be glad to answer specific questions about the West, its ranches, homestead lands, mountains and plains, as well as the facts about any features of Western life. He will tell you also how to reach the particular place in which you are interested. Don't hesitate to write to him, for he is always glad to assist you to the best of his ability. Be sure to inclose a stamped envelope for your reply.

Address all communications to John North, care of Street & Smith's **Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.**

Missing Department

PARSON, HARRY—He worked on a dairy farm in Braeburn, Pennsylvania, in 1921. He left there and I last heard from him in 1922 when he was working for a man by the name of W. E. Wolf in Vanadaum, Colorado. He was thinking of taking up a homestead at that time, but didn't say just where. He is about forty years old. If anyone knows his whereabouts, will they please get in touch with me?—Mrs. Margaret Reedy, 1233 Speer Boulevard, Denver, Colorado.

DALE, FERN—She was the wife of James Richard Dale, now dead. They lived in Bakersfield, California, at the time of his death. She has a sister, Mrs. Albert Jensen. If anyone knows her whereabouts, please write to me.—Frances Dale, 401 Haven Street, Washington, North Carolina.

NOTICE—I would like to hear from descendants of the Packwood family who lived in Henry and Patrick Counties, Virginia, in the early days. —Allan McKenzie, 437 Stanford Avenue, Los Angeles, California.

MARTIN, GEORGE—He is my half brother. Born in Aberdeen, South Dakota, as near as I can calculate, during the year 1883. My stepfather, Delbert Martin, left my mother after a quarrel and took George with him when he was only four weeks old. He was raised by his grandmother, Mrs. George Upton, and they lived in Los Angeles, California. Mother visited him there when he was nine years old, and some years later an uncle of George's, Jack Martin, visited us in St. Paul, Minnesota, and told her that the boy was still in Los Angeles and was being educated there. Mother died in 1903 and that is the last news I had of him. I would be glad to learn if he is still living, or any facts about his death. I am the only survivor of thirteen children, unless the missing George also lives, so you can understand what a treat it would be if I could locate him. If anyone knows his whereabouts I'd certainly appreciate it if they would get in touch with me.—Warren D. Bowen, P. O. Box 307, Victorville, California.

FOYE, SCOTT J. and ED MAJOR—I would like to hear from these two men or from anyone who knows their whereabouts. Scott Foye was formerly of West Haven, Connecticut, well built, red hair, about five feet, seven inches tall. He started for the West coast and has not been heard of since June, 1940. Ed Major, formerly of Joplin, Missouri, is tall, has dark hair, wears glasses and is a prospector and miner. If anyone has any information concerning them, will they please write to "A Friend," in care of the Missing Department, Western Story.

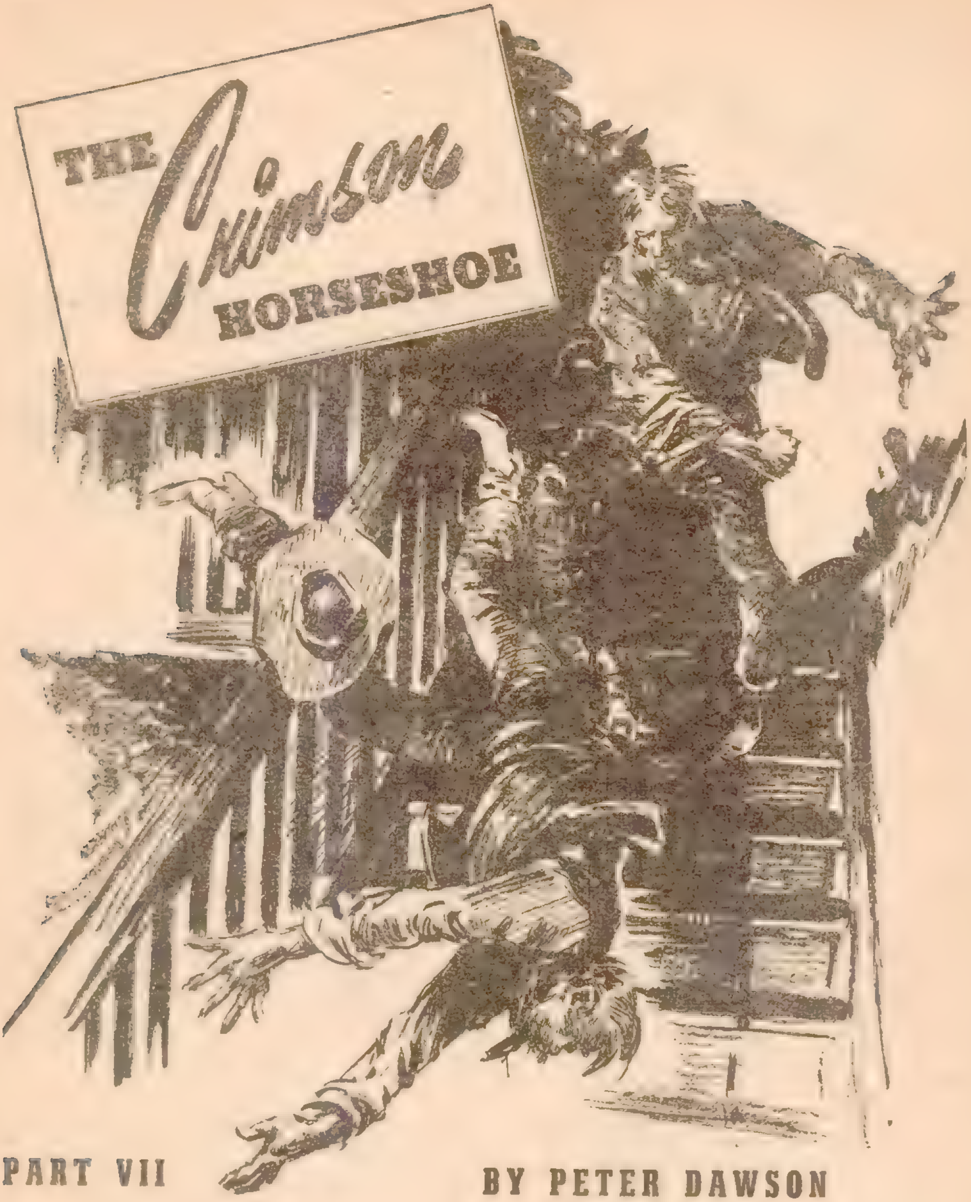
● There is no charge for the insertion of requests for information concerning missing relatives or friends.

While it will be better to use your name in the notices, we will print your request "blind" if you prefer. In sending "blind" notices, you must, of course, give us your right name and address, so that we can forward promptly any letters that may come for you. We reserve the right to reject any notice that seems to us unsuitable. Because "copy" for a magazine must go to the printer long in advance of publication, don't expect to see your notice till a considerable time after you send it.

If it can be avoided, please do not send a "General Delivery" post-office address, for experience has proved that those persons who are not specific as to address often have mail that we send them returned to us marked "not found." It would be well, also, to notify us of any change in your address.

WARNING.—Do not forward money to anyone who sends you a letter or telegram, asking for money "to get home," et cetera, until you are absolutely certain that the author of such telegram or letter is the person you are seeking.

Address all your communications to Missing Department, Street & Smith's Western Story, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.



PART VII

BY PETER DAWSON

The Story So Far:

Breaking parole in New Mexico, where he killed a man in self-defense, Jim Allard heads for the Circle A spread at the invitation of his distant cousin, Hugh Allard, who says he has a job for him. Jim learns that Allard is involved in a dispute with his neighbor, Miles Kittering, owner of the Block K.

It does not take Jim long to discover that Hugh Allard is using ruthless, treacherous methods to get Kittering out of the way, and has even hired Spade Deshay, a notorious outlaw, to rustle Circle A cattle, laying the blame on the Block K. Jim refuses outright to have anything to do with his cousin and throws in with Miles Kittering instead.

Jim rides into the hills to Spade Deshay's hide-out and tells the outlaw that he is being used by Hugh Allard—Deshay had thought he was working for Miles Kittering since Allard had contacted him through a man he had placed on Kittering's payroll.

On the way to town, Jim, Spade and his partner, are ambushed by Allard and some Circle A riders. The two outlaws escape, but Jim is taken prisoner. Allard tries to murder Jim by locking him in a barn which is then set fire to, but Jim escapes.

Ignorant of Jim's escape, Allard rides to town to demand that Sheriff Fred Blythe serve a warrant on Kittering whom he accuses of firing his barn. Waiting for the lawman to return to his office, Allard reads a telegram on the desk. From it he realizes that the sheriff has learned too much about him and decides on the most daring move he has made so far. He intends to murder Blythe and blame the killing on Kittering.

After his escape from the burning barn, Jim had returned to the Block K, having met Kittering and some of his men who had come to investigate the fire. Spade Deshay and his partner are there waiting for them, having decided to throw in with Kittering against Allard.

Allard's men succeed in getting the Block K foreman, Fats Holden, jailed for a killing he committed in self-defense. Knowing that Kittering and his men will come to town to break Holden out of jail, the Allard riders hole up and prepare to blast down their enemies from ambush.

Reaching town, Jim heads for the telegraph office where he obtains a copy of the telegram Hugh Allard had read earlier that night in the sheriff's office. The telegram explains Allard's ruthless campaign against Block K. As a director of the Sierra & Western Railroad, Allard had learned that a new right of way was being planned to shorten the rail route several hundred miles by cutting across Block K and through a pass in the mountains. By driving Kittering away and grabbing Block K, Allard stood to make a fortune on the deal with the railroad.

CHAPTER XXVI

POWDER-FLAME AMBUSH

MILES KITTERING didn't at once move out from the wood shed as he finished his brusque suggestion. He seemed to be hesitating while his mind took in the full import of the telegram, of all that had happened tonight, and of all that Jim had so shrewdly guessed. He stood there, his shadow bulking solidly in the faint starlight. It was as though now, for the first time, he knew the full enormity of Hugh Allard's guilt and was appalled by it. Far out on the flats a train's whistle called two long signals and Kittering took out his watch and glanced down at it, and then dropped it back in his pocket again. It was too dark to read the time, and his move had been purely automatic before his run of thought.

Jim's low voice broke the tension. "How do we go about it, Kittering?"

There was no indecision about Kittering's answer. "Split up, take to the alleys, and go in through the office. I'll wait on the walk with Dawes, while you three go in and blow off the locks. Why didn't we think to bring along a jughead for Fats?"

"He can double up with me," came Dawes' easy drawl.

"Then let's get on with it." Kittering was through waiting, and stepped out around Two Card and led the way from behind the far corner of the shed.

Spade and Two Card followed Kittering, heading for the gradual embankment on the near side of the tracks and, beyond it, the narrow passageway going along the jail's far side.

"Stick with me, Johnny," Jim said, and started out toward the alleyway between Slater's store and the jail.

He moved warily, trying to make no sound as his boots trod the edge of the railway's gravel bed. The warning signals of an unknown danger were threading his nerves. Two days ago, while riding to Kittering's from Circle A, he'd had the same feeling without knowing what caused it. Tonight he blamed it on the long keyed-up hours he'd spent since dawn. A lot had happened

since then and a lot had gone out of him.

Dawes, close beside him, said in a low voice: "We've got to watch Miles, Jim. When he's like this he takes chances, he's wild as—"

A gun's startling explosion cut in on his words. Jim, whose glance had strayed across to Kittering, saw Two Card Bates fold at the waist and lurch off balance at the exact instant of the shot.

A split-second afterward Kittering whirled, stumbled into Two Card, then gathered the outlaw in his arms as he was falling. He shouted, "Cover!" and, lifting Two Card in his arms, started back for the wood shed at a run. Other guns cut loose from the roofs of the buildings flanking the jail. Spade, slower than Kittering, lunged sideways momentarily as a bullet either hit him or came close. Then he was following Kittering at a zigzag run, arms crossed over his waist for his draw.

Jim's glance had instantly swept around from Kittering to Dawes and beyond. He sensed that they were too far from the shed to gain its shelter easily. At the same moment he saw a waist-high pile of square-cut ties twenty feet on down the tracks and pushed Dawes that way. "Over there!" he commanded. The next instant a bullet swept his Stetson from his head.

JOHNNY DAWES streaked for the cover of the tie pile, with Jim three strides behind. Jim saw two slashes of powder flame point the darkness up along the roofs. As Dawes dropped to the ground up ahead, Jim left his feet in a rolling dive, right hand stabbing to holster and palming a gun. He tried one snap shot at the roof as he hit the ground and rolled in behind the ties. Dawes, already crouching at the far end, let out a sharp breath as a scream echoed into the night from the roof tops. He looked back at Jim over his shoulder, and grinned.

"Dead center!" he announced. "If the slug didn't get him, the wall did!"

A spasmodic burst of fire rattled down on the shed and the stack of ties. Over behind the shed a .45 answered twice. A thin-drawn silence held for several seconds, until Dawes, hugging the gravel and leveling his Colt methodically, shot once. He hunched back and rolled over. "Missed him, hang it!" He squinted his eyes as a chip flew off the corner of the nearest tie before the answering volley of the guns on the roof.

Lying there, waiting out this renewed burst of firing, Jim saw vague shadows bulging the line of the shed's rear wall. "All right, Kittering?" he called.

The deep bass voice of Block K's owner came back solemnly: "They got Bates." Out across the flats the train whistle sounded again, nearer now.

"They've got us cornered!" Dawes said. "We can't even get to our horses!" They had tied their mounts along the far wall of the shed, in a direct line of fire from the roofs.

Two more shots came from Slater's store, then one from the roof of the saddle shop on the far side of the jail. Kittering didn't answer that fire, and in the ensuing silence Jim heard the faint hum of the approaching train singing along the rails.

He turned to Dawes. "When that train pulls past, we move."

"Not a chance!" Dawes argued. "It's just a two-car passenger hitch. Won't give us time."

Jim lay there trying to think. They could take their chances on running back across the open ground beyond the wood shed. But that would be a risk, and they wouldn't have their horses. As the rumble of the approaching train grew louder, Jim's mind tried to search out another way. There didn't seem to be any. Allard's men—and there was no doubt but what those guns on the roofs were Circle A's—had nicely trapped them. Allard's crew wasn't at Block K, as they'd supposed, but here in town. Holden was in jail, charged with murder. Allard's story that Kittering was holding Blythe must have spread through the town by now; it would be only a matter of time before more guns backed those already against Kittering, who would be hunted down as mercilessly as a mad dog run amuck.

Dawes breathed ominously: "Jim, we're in the devil of a spot!" He spoke as though he thought he was telling Jim something he hadn't known before.

Now Jim could hear the pound of the locomotive's exhaust as it was thrown back by the first few buildings two hundred yards away, at the outskirts of town. The train's light suddenly swung straight down the tracks and illuminated the scene. Against it, Jim saw the shapes of Kittering and Spade Deshay behind the wood shed. Spade was kneeling beside Two Card, who lay on the ground.

Jim had had warning of Kittering's rash temper. "Don't make a run for it, Miles!" he shouted, hoping his voice would carry above the roar of the train.

Then, suddenly, he had a thought that made him roll over to a crouch. He glanced along the row of stores, seeing one far down that jutted out close to the tracks. He

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had the time to say briefly, "Stay set, Johnny!" before the locomotive drew abreast of him.

He came to his feet and ran in toward the fast-moving train. The first of the two passenger coaches swept past him, its brakes squealing as the engineer slowed for the station. But it was still going fast. Jim ran close alongside, shielded temporarily from the men on the roofs. Without slowing his stride, he reached out for the rear hand rail of the end coach as it blurred past. He caught a hold and was jerked off his feet. His arm stretched out, pulling his weight along; a sudden stab of pain went into his wrist. Then his momentum carried him inward and one knee struck the bottom step of the car's platform. He caught his hold and got his feet under him.

He swung quickly outward onto the ladder that climbed to the car's roof, and went up it. Behind him came a sporadic exploding of guns, uneven, vicious. Jim hurried to swing himself to the roof of the car. Once there, he stood in a crouch, seeing the overhanging roof of the store he had noticed from down there sweeping past him.

He thought he was too late, and nearly hesitated. Then he jumped and his long frame vaulted across the ten-foot space between car roof and that of the store.

His boots struck on the roof's edge and he threw his body sharply sideways in a roll, slamming hard into the wall of the next building. It sickened him a little to look back and see how narrow was the strip of tarred roof that had saved him from instant death. Then he put that from his mind as he came to his feet, hearing the guns far back along the tracks again.

JIM climbed from the roof and up across the peaked one of the adjoining building. The sound of the guns down there stopped suddenly, and he had one wild, nerve-chilling moment in which he thought that maybe Kittering and the others had tried to make a break for it and been shot down. Then a single sharp explosion told him that the fight wasn't over. He jumped across an eight-foot open passageway that separated two buildings. Then he was over another peaked roof and crossing the next flat one. He looked obliquely down and saw that the wood shed beyond the tracks lay only two buildings away. This next building, the one beyond with the gradual pitch to its roof, was Slater's store.

He edged upward along the shingled slope, his boots slipping a little. Looking toward the street, he could see the second floor of the hotel, and he caught the sound of subdued voices out on the walks. A window midway the length of the hotel was open. Jim could see faintly a man's head and shoulders leaning out of it, and thought, grimly, that whoever had rented that room tonight was getting his money's worth in excitement.

Near the crest of the roof, Jim flattened his body and edged upward slowly. Reaching down and drawing his right gun from holster, he took the time to punch out the two empties and put in fresh loads. Beyond, he heard a gun speak sharply three times. Then he pushed himself upward so that he could look over the ridge.

Down across the far side, Jim saw two vague shapes crouched behind the false rear parapet. He tried to lay his sights on the nearest, but in the darkness he couldn't be sure of either the sights or his target. He

shot by instinct, and hard on the heel of his gun's explosion saw his target come erect and heard Trent Harms' wild call.

"They're up here! Get down!"

The Circle A men had been caught by surprise. Not knowing how many guns were against him, and only that he was exposed now, Harms' reaction was the natural one.

After calling to his men, Harms turned and fanned his gun empty, four shots that made a riot of swelling sound. He aimed at the roof's ridge. Jim winced as a bullet flicked a splinter from the ridge pole that gouged his face.

Looking down there again, he was in time to see Harms turn and run, finally sliding off over the eaves gutter and dropping into the passageway alongside the jail. The foreman's companion, tardier, tried the same line of escape. But, instead of jumping at once, he turned and opened up with two guns on the vague line of the ridge. His shots were wide. Jim dropped his Colt into line and triggered once. The Circle A man grunted, vainly threw out his arms to regain his balance, and fell stiffly backward and downward out of sight, the thud of his fall into the passageway plainly audible.

Beyond the jail, Jim heard men running across the saddle-shop roof toward the street. He stood up, called, "Come on, Kittering!" and started walking the ridge toward the street. Below he heard Harms running across the walk out of the passageway, and toward the saddle shop. The creaking board awning told him how the other Circle A men were leaving their roof. He could hear people running down the walks and concluded that the appearance of Allard's men had flushed a few bystanders out of the way.

Suddenly, a gun flashed in the open window of the hotel's upper floor. A hard blow on Jim's left shoulder carried him off balance. He fell, letting his knees buckle under him, and was halfway down the roof slope before he could slow his roll. He lay belly down and emptied his .38 through the open window across there. Strangely enough, his shoulder didn't hurt; but a wetness along the thick muscle over his shoulder told him he was bleeding.

He forgot that as boots echoed up along the passageway immediately below. He called, "Kittering!" and Johnny Dawes' voice answered, "Down here, Jim!"

Jim worked down to the edge of the roof, swung out over the gutter, and dropped into the passageway.

Dawes said, close behind: "Nice work, Jim! Deshay and Miles took the other side."

Jim went up the passageway, reloading, and came abreast the wide porch of the store and even with the side window of the sheriff's office. Lifting a foot, he kicked out the window's lower sash and stepped in through it as Kittering's bulky shape wheeled into the doorway off the walk.

"Who is it?" Kittering asked sharply.

Jim spoke in a flat, toneless voice: "Cover the window, Kittering. We're going in after Holden!"

AS Jim turned to the back of the office to the spot where he remembered the door, Kittering knocked out two panes of the street window with the butt of his Colt. He knelt there, glancing toward the hotel a moment. Then he raised his gun and thumbed three slow-timed

shots toward the hotel. The gun's explosions were deafening in the confined space of this small room. From outside, at the mouth of the alleyway at the far side of the jail, Jim heard another gun add its din to Kittering's; he knew that this must be Spade. Kittering had used foresight in leaving the outlaw out there to cover the street.

As the echo of Kittering's shots died out along the street's wide canyon, Jim flicked a match alight and shielded its flame in a cupped palm as he inspected the jail door. A big sturdy padlock sealed the steel-faced door.

"Back, Johnny!" Jim said, and fired two shots at the padlock. Lighting a second match, he saw that his lead hadn't broken the lock. So next he put the muzzle of his gun close to the shank of the double hasp and fired again. In the darkness he reached out and found the heavy steel bent and twisted. He shot once more, the sound of his gun blended with that of Kittering's second burst, and this time the hasp broke off from the door's face.

As he and Dawes strode down the short corridor between the cells, Holden's voice said ominously: "That you, Harms?"

"Holy smokes, no!" Johnny Dawes told him, striking a light.

Fats Holden's long face broke from severity into a wide grin as the matchlight struck into his cell. "I'll be blowed!" he breathed. "You didn't waste much time gettin' here! What's up out there?"

"Later, Holden," Jim said quickly, his words punctuated by the exploding concussion of his single shot at the cell's lock. The plate of the lock broke under the bullet, and Holden, sensing the urgency in Jim's tone, slammed his shoulder against the grilled door and broke the lock open.

As Holden stepped out, Jim handed him his second gun and belt and wheeled back into the office once more.

"Holden there?" Kittering asked as he heard them come into the office.

"Right here, Miles. How does it look?"

The Block K owner came away from the window as Jim put his query. From the alleyway close by, Spade's gun laid a flat sound along the street and was answered by several shots from the upper story of the hotel.

"I'm goin' across there! Keep me covered!" Kittering said, and swung around toward the door onto the walk.

Jim reached out and took a hold on Kittering's arm, pulling him back sharply. "And get killed?" he demanded sharply. Then, "This way!" He pulled Kittering toward the side window of the office. "Johnny, stay here and keep those guns across the street busy!"

He and Kittering and Holden stepped out the window. When Jim turned to go back along the passageway, Kittering said angrily: "Now listen, Jim, I'm not runnin' out!"

"No one's runnin'," Jim told him. "If you want your try at Allard, stay with me."

"But why go back there?" Kittering asked.

Jim ignored his question, not taking the time to explain as he ran back along the narrow passageway. He heard Kittering and Holden following, and presently the three of them were standing in the mouth of another passageway four doors below the jail.

Up the street, Johnny Dawes' and Spade's guns were lining a rattling

fire across at the hotel. From this point they could see that the street wasn't as deserted as it looked. Hushed voices came from the doorway of a store close by, and across the street a light glowed in the window of Mary Quinn's restaurant, its out wash vaguely showing other men standing across there in the shadows. The town had been stirred from its deep before-dawn sleep, but these men, watching the guns flare out down the street, were making no attempt to join in the fight.

As they paused there, Kittering said, "Now what?" not querulously, for he was seeing the possibilities of this move of Jim's.

"Get onto the roofs across there if we can," Jim told him.

"Mary Quinn would let us use her upstairs window," Fats said abruptly.

"Then come on!" Kittering led the way out across the walk.

Jim and Fats, close behind Block K's owner, carried their guns openly in their hands. Someone in the near store doorway whispered loudly, "It's Kittering!" the awed quality of his voice reassuring Jim that the townspeople had no wish to take sides in this fight now.

Jim and Fats were going in through the doorway of the restaurant when a man called out sharply two doors below: "Back, you fool! Want to get shot?"

"Bailey's down there, Miles," Fats told Kittering, recognizing the voice. "Didn't see us."

His voice echoed hollowly through the empty room of the restaurant. On the heel of his words, the curtains at the door to the kitchen parted, and Mary Quinn stood there. Her blond hair hung loosely about her shoulders, and she wore a dark-red wool robe gathered tightly by a knotted cord at her slim waist.

When she saw who it was, her eyes widened and she breathed, "You, Fats!"

"We want to get out onto the roof through your upstairs window, Mary," Fats explained. She looked at him mutely a brief moment, alarm in her eyes, then nodded and held the curtain aside for them to pass through around the end of the counter.

A narrow stairway led up out of the kitchen. Kittering and Jim went ahead, Holden hanging back. Jim heard the girl say tensely, urgently, "Be careful, Fats!" and then Holden's step was mounting the stairs.

MARY QUINN'S bedroom was dark, the rectangle of the curtained window the only relief in the blackness. Kittering opened the window and sat on the sill, swinging his legs through and dropping four feet to the roof of the neighboring building. A desultory pair of shots sounded along the street as Jim and Holden followed. Kittering said sharply, "What's the matter up there?" and went on, wasting no time now, going up a roof slope on hands and knees. The hotel's high outline was in sight in the far shadows, two buildings away.

"They may be thinkin' of this!" Holden called in a strident whisper, but if Kittering heard he gave no sign of it.

Shortly, they were on the flat roof adjoining the hotel, the roof Jim had jumped onto from his window two nights ago. There were four windows along this side.

"Take the back one, Miles," said Jim, "it's open." Kittering swung off that way.

He stopped below the window. "Give me a boost," he said to Jim; it had never occurred to him not to go in first.

"I've got a bum shoulder," Jim said. "Fats, you're the goat." This brief let-down had made Jim aware of a throbbing pain in his shoulder. But he could move it easily and knew that no bones were broken.

They stiffened and faced the street as a sudden violent slam of firing came sharply from out there. They heard Dawes' and Spade's guns now. Kittering smiled bleakly. "That's more like it!" He pushed Fats down and heaved himself up onto his foreman's back, reaching up and catching a hold on the sill of the window.

"Don't forget me!" Fats said, as Jim stepped up onto his shoulders. Kittering was already out of sight through the window overhead.

Jim had trouble pulling himself up. He found his left arm nearly useless, and only managed to keep from falling by a last upthrust of a boot that caught on the window ledge and braced him. Once inside the room he had to close his eyes and lean back against the wall. Gradually his reeling senses steadied themselves. His right fist clenched his hurt shoulder in a hard grip that finally numbed the pain. Then, one knee braced against the wall, he reached down from the window with his good arm and caught Fats' wrist and lifted. Fats got his hold on the sill and climbed on up.

"What's wrong with your shoulder?" he asked as he eased in through the window.

Before Jim had the time to answer, an explosion ripped its way along the hallway beyond the open door. Fats grated, "Why in tarnation didn't Miles wait for us!" and tramped loudly across the room to the door.

Jim caught up with him and laid a hand on his arm. "Easy!" he whispered. "I know my way around here. Let me go first!" He led the way soundlessly out into the hall, turning up along it toward the street.

Far up the corridor they heard steps cross a room and then a gun laid its shattering echoes along the hallway. In the following silence, hearing Holden's shallow breathing behind, Jim wondered where Kittering was, and damned the man's impatience in not waiting. Now they wouldn't know whose guns they faced.

All at once a voice spoke up there —Trent Harms': "I don't like this, Hugh! Not a damn bit! There's only two jaspers over there. Ought to be four, five if they busted Holden out!"

Answering him, Hugh Allard's voice said in sharp derision: "Spooked, Trent?"

CHAPTER XXVII

BLOCK K PAYS OFF

AFTER that, the stillness grew so complete that Jim reached back and laid a hard hold on Fats Holden's shoulder, thinking that the sound of the thin man's breathing might give them away. The hallway, the whole building, seemed as deserted as it had three nights ago, in the early-morning hours when he stood looking down at Chalmers' body in the chair by the wash stand, waiting while the old clerk summoned the sheriff. Yet he knew that three, probably five, men besides himself and Holden were somewhere in this hallway or in these rooms. Harms' query and Allard's answer had shown a tension between the

two men. Harms already sensed that something was wrong here; Allard probably sensed it too, but was coolly playing for a break.

Up there, somewhere, Miles Kittering had heard those two voices, and was waiting for his chance. For the last ten seconds the guns at the jail had been silent. Spade, who hadn't been told what was happening, might be waiting for a target, saving his lead. Johnny Dawes was probably reloading. Jim was wishing desperately that either of them would open up again. The utter stillness was almost too much to stand.

When it was broken, by the small sound of something slurring across the boards of the floor close at hand, the raw edges of Jim's nerves were frayed almost to the breaking point. His hold on Fats' shoulder tightened, warning the other to silence. In his right hand, the smooth cedar butt plates of the .38 were clammy with perspiration. He swiveled the gun up in line with the sound, uncertainly, for he wasn't sure of its exact direction.

"Trent!"

Hugh Allard's muted call along the corridor brought Jim up rigid, then eased the tension out of him instantly.

"Trent! Get back here!" This time Allard's call was louder, more intent.

Again, he got no answer. The flat echo of a lone shot came in off the street. There was no reply to it.

"Matt, where's Trent?" Allard called again.

"He ain't here," a voice shuttled down the cross passage at the head of the stairs from a room on the far corner.

"Ran out on us!" was Allard's curt statement, and Jim heard him moving across the room at the head of the passageway.

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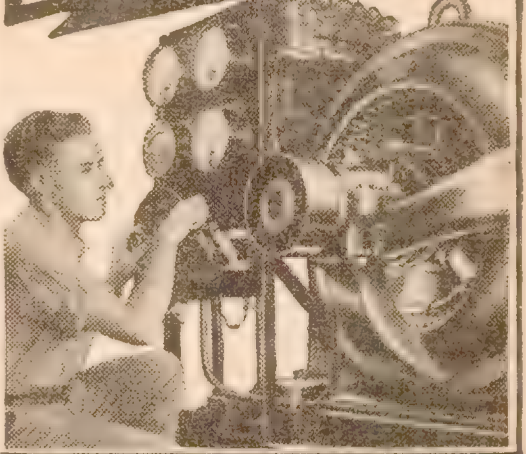

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"What's wrong across there, boss?" Matt's voice called.

Allard didn't reply. But from the room where he had spoken welled a burst of sound as his gun sent four savage, swiftly timed shots out across the street.

Suddenly Jim was aware again of that presence in front of him in the hallway. It was pitch black here, but some strange intuition told him that a man was standing close to him.

He said softly: "Miles!" Immediately there was the quick scrape of a boot. Jim dodged out from the wall.

A gun's close-confined concussion wiped out the stillness. In the flare of its foot-long stab of flame, lined at the wall where he had stood a split second ago, Jim saw Trent Harms' tight-drawn, square face staring across at him. He whipped out with his Colt, slashing downward at Harms' head as that brief flash died out. His weapon traveled farther down than it should have, and he knew he had missed his blow. Then it connected, glancing off Harms' shoulder. The foreman's chopping slash on his wrist sent the .38 spinning from his hand. Remembering the other's weapon, Jim lunged in, his arms closing around Harms' thick upper body in a drive that carried them both off balance.

They fell into the partition across the hallway, and Jim heard Holden run on past and toward the stairway. Holden shouted, "Jim!" and a gunshot from the side hallway crowded out the echo of his call.

As more shots cut loose down there, Jim let go his hold an instant, trying to reach for Harms' right hand that held the gun. But Harms was too quick for him, and tore the arm away. Jim threw his body in a roll across the narrow corridor as Harms' gun exploded almost in his face. The scorching heat of the powder flash swept past his face. His back slammed against the far wall, he came to his feet and dove on Harms again.

This time Jim pinned Harms' right wrist to the floor. He tried to slug the foreman with his left, but the muscles of that arm seemed suddenly flabby and inaccurate. Harms hit him a blow at the base of the neck that took him off balance again. Jim fell onto his back, but still held tight to the wrist. Then Harms was on him, slugging wildly with his free hand. Jim turned his head, took a blow on the side of it, then lifted his legs in a sudden upthrust.

His boots came up over the Circle A man's shoulders and locked in front of his face and, straightening his body, Jim pulled Harms backward. The drive of the ramrod's backward fall tore his wrist from Jim's grasp. Jim sat up, reaching out to fend off the blow he sensed was swinging down at him again. It hit his left arm, numbed it, but gave him its direction. He tried to throw himself across onto Harms, but his shoulder hit the wall hard; Harms had rolled out from under him.

Jim heard Harms getting to his feet and, boots braced against the wall, pushed out in the direction of the sound. His shoulder hit Harms' knees and swept the ramrod from his feet, back toward the head of the stairs. As Harms went down with a heavy thud, Jim heard the gun strike the boards and go skidding along the floor, far out of reach. Then both he and Harms were coming erect.

Jim gathered the whole weight of his body behind the first slamming drive of his right fist. He struck out

wildly into that blackness. His fist brushed one of the ramrod's arms aside and glanced off his chest. Harms struck a hard blow that caught Jim in the pit of the stomach and drove the breath sharply out of him. Then they were standing close, feet spraddled, slugging, gouging, Harms kicking out in an attempt to use his spurs.

Jim threw his blows at Harms' head, time and again feeling the hard bony pattern of the man's face under his knuckles. He was hardly aware that guns were speaking again along the hallway. With each blow he drove in at Harms he took half a step forward, doggedly, his brain dulled to everything but the need for battering Harms off his feet. Suddenly, behind Harms, he saw the open well of the stairway faintly outlined by dim lamplight from the lobby below. He could see Harms' shape, hunched over in a half crouch, heavy shoulders rocking as he threw vicious, hard punches.

Coolly now, striking to force Harms into the head of the stairs, Jim struck out time and again, feebly with his left, hard with his right. Once he connected to rock Harms' head sharply to one side. But the man stayed on his widespread feet, desperation seeming to give him a superhuman strength. Jim couldn't drag enough air into his lungs and his arms were going leaden on him. His punches were slow, so slow that he wondered why Harms didn't simply step out of the way. It never occurred to him that Harms didn't have the strength to move aside, that he was exhausted, too.

Finally, as the Circle A man stood within a bare step of the last tread of the stairs, he seemed to sense his danger. He glanced back over his shoulder, then went to a lower crouch. He hunched his head down between his shoulders and stopped swinging with his arms, reaching out instead and lunging in at Jim.

Every ounce of energy in Jim's lean body was behind the blow his right arm struck that last time. The travel of his fist began at the level of his knees. It ended on the shelf of Harms' chin, lifting the ramrod's upper body erect and tilting his head far back.

The Circle A man fell out and backward, slowly, his whole body going loose. He hit the stairs with boots already wheeling up and over his head. His body doubled, and he rolled on down the steps and over twice across the lobby floor until he lay face down, crumpled, fingers clawed into the carpet.

JIM stood looking down at him, fascinated, dragging a deep breath into his starved lungs. Never before had he consciously wanted to kill a man. But now he was hoping that that fall had killed Harms. It was a brutal and nerveless thought, he realized; still, he wanted it to end that way.

He started down there, slowly, holding to the stair railing to steady himself, wanting to make sure. Abruptly, a tall gray-clad figure moved out of the shadows at the foot of the stairs and knelt beside Harms.

Jim stopped. The man down there he recognized as Virgil Pierce, and the bounty hunter's presence sent a flood of warning through him. He saw Pierce reach to his hip pocket, take out a pair of handcuffs and expertly flick them about the unconscious man's wrists. His move pronounced Harms still alive. But it confused Jim. Why was Pierce taking Harms prisoner?

A quick flare of anger took him, then died. A killing urge had a moment ago robbed him of his reason. Now it returned in a wave of apprehension. The guns along the hallway were ominously silent now. Pierce had effectively removed Harms from the fight. It didn't matter what happened to Harms after this. He was out of it. But Pierce was down there, representing a new threat. Jim had no illusions about the man's cold-blooded, one-track mind, nor about what Pierce would do if he saw him.

Jim wheeled quickly up the stairs and went back along the hall in search of his gun. His boot kicked an object on the floor and he stooped and his groping fingers touched the cold steel of a gun's frame. Its weight told him that it was his, not the .45 Harms had dropped.

For a moment he stood there, arm bracing him against the wall, listening. He should be prowling the hallways, looking for Kittering and Holden. The firing that had sounded up here as he and Harms fought at the stair head had meaning now, as it hadn't had then. But now he had nothing to go on, the stillness as ominous as it had been when he and Fats first came into the hallway. He wanted to call out, but couldn't risk it. Hugh Allard had been up there three minutes ago; he might still be there, waiting, ready with deadly gun.

Jim saw a flickering light come on in the doorway at the end of the corridor. A man's elongated shadow wavered against the wall beyond the door.

He thumbed back the hammer of the Colt and started walking soundlessly toward that open door. The acrid stench of powder smoke was strong along this narrow confined space. It seemed to steady his nerves to the task of facing whoever had struck the match in that room up ahead. Whoever it was, a Circle A man or a Block K rider, he was going to see this thing finished.

WHEN Fats Holden had felt Jim's grip on his shoulder suddenly ease off, he sensed, as Jim had, that they were not alone in the narrow corridor. He heard Jim whisper, "Miles!" Then, in quick succession, Jim moved away from him, a gun exploded deafeningly less than three feet ahead, and he heard the hard slam of two bodies colliding.

In the confusion of the next few seconds, Fats thought that Jim had gone toward the stairs. He ran that way along the hall, calling, "Jim!"

He reached the head of the stairs. Suddenly, to his left, a .45 laid a sharp burst of sound along the side corridor. A searing pain burned along Fats' left thigh. His glance whipped down the passageway in time to see a man's outline against the faintly lighted window at the far end. In the split second he knew that the shape was too slim, too high, to be Kittering's. He pressed the trigger, and thumbed the hammer back as the gun bucked. The action of the .38 was smooth. He shot twice more, until that shape melted down out of the window's rectangle. He heard a choked cough and knew his bullets had found a target.

As he lowered the Colt, a single shot beat along the main hallway to send him up the passageway toward the front of the building. That close-confined explosion told him that the gun up there hadn't been aimed out a window at the jail. He was remembering that Miles Kittering was up here somewhere, remembering, too, Hugh Allard's voice as

he and Jim had stood down the hallway listening.

A flood of panic took Fats as he stumbled blindly streetward along the corridor. A brief ominous silence was ended by a prolonged deafening burst of shots that blended together in a continuous roar. They ended suddenly, and afterward Fats heard a scuffling sound behind him, and the thump of a heavy body hitting the stairs and rolling down it.

He ignored what was happening behind, and plunged through the door at the hallway end, thinking of Kittering. Faint light showed him the room's single window. His throat balled up as stark fear laid its hold on him. He wanted to call Kittering's name, but couldn't summon the word. His trembling fingers groped in his vest pocket for a match. He flicked his thumbnail over the match's sulphur tip and squinted against the sudden flare of light, tense, his gun ready. His glance took in the gray-blanketed iron bed, a varnished wardrobe at the far wall, and the white gleam of a basin and pitcher on a low washstand.

Then, almost at his feet, he saw a shadow. He held the match out and looked down. He was staring into Hugh Allard's glassy-eyed narrow face. A nausea gripped him at the sight of the bloody red-stained shirt front.

FATS whirled as a dragging step came from the back corner of the room. There stood Miles Kittering, a .45 hanging from his right hand, his left pressed to his side. To one side of Kittering a cluster of bullet holes had scarred the bare board wall. Kittering didn't seem aware of his foreman's presence as he stared unwinkingly across at the body on the floor.

The match burned out. Fats reached for another, realizing that a moment ago those shots had signaled

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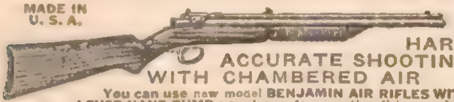

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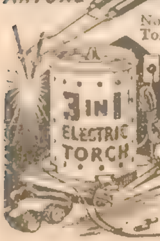

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the fact of Kittering exacting his vengeance. Allard's call to Trent Harms had told Kittering which room to enter. Holden had no way of knowing how they had fought it out, probably would never know. All that mattered was that Kittering was still on his feet and that Allard lay there with a bullet-riddled chest, dead.

The thin man was humble before a momentary feeling of thankfulness. Then he remembered Jim Allard.

He stepped over to the door, wiping a match alight along his flat thigh. Its sudden flare showed him Jim Allard standing in the doorway, a Colt leveled in his hand, his lean face tight with nerve strain.

Jim let his breath out in a long low whistle, nosing the .38 down as he drawled: "That's better!" His glance went beyond Holden to the body on the floor, then across to Kittering. And, briefly, a smile broke the flat planes of his face, then faded as he looked more closely at Kittering. He said, "Miles!" urgently, and stepped over and put an arm around the rancher, who was now swaying on his feet.

Jim had seen the blood smearing the hand Kittering held to his side. He said: "Sit down, Miles." Then, jerking a nod at Holden, who was lighting a lamp on the washstand, he added: "Better get a doctor!"

Kittering breathed, "I'm all right," but leaned back heavily against the wall. For the first time, he took his glance away from Allard's upturned face and stared around the room dazedly, as though he didn't quite know where he was. Fats Holden turned out the door, and his boots struck quickly back along the hallway.

Jim ripped Kittering's shirt open. A deep, ugly wound had torn the flesh away along the man's lower ribs on his left side. But the bullet

had glanced off a rib and not penetrated.

Now, from out on the street, came shouts and the quick-timed sound of riders swinging in toward the veranda. The screen door of the lobby slammed loudly, and voices shuttled in through the open window. Stepping over there, Jim saw a knot of riders directly below. He recognized one voice as Fred Blythe's, then a call from the veranda as Virgil Pierce's.

He turned slowly from the window to face Kittering. "Well, it's over, Miles," he said.

Kittering nodded slowly. He stepped over to a chair and sat down heavily on it, giving Jim a long, steady look. "I gave him a fair chance, Jim," he said. "He got the first shot."

There was a strong admiration for this man in Jim. Kittering had fought a hard battle and had won. His life from now on would smooth out into straight channels, and his tomorrows would be certain, even happy, now that he and Ann were together.

Thinking this, Jim was reminded of his own future, and of something even more urgent, the presence of Virgil Pierce down there with the man who had just ridden in along the street. He had a moment of indecision, as those voices came up to him again. Then, reluctantly, he stepped over alongside Kittering's chair. He held out his hand.

"I'll say adios, Miles."

Kittering's puzzled glance lifted to meet his. "Where to?"

"Back home."

"Thought they wanted you back there."

"They do. But I'll make out all right. I can pull a few strings."

Kittering's firm grasp met Jim's. The rancher's face took on the deep scowl he used to screen emotion. "We'd like you to stay on," he said gruffly.

Jim shook his head and lied calmly: "Not a chance. Back there's home, Miles."

He heard men crossing the lobby downstairs and took his hand away. "Tell Fats not to take any wooden nickels," he said, and went out the door.

PASSING the head of the stairs, Jim glanced down and saw Fred Blythe mounting the steps. Below the sheriff, passing the counter, came Ann Allard. Jim had that one brief glimpse of her before he went on, quietly, and down the narrow back stairs at the end of the hall.

Sight of the girl hardened a growing bitterness within him. He was leaving Sands tonight, for good, without the answers he had sworn to get before pulling out. But those answers to Billy Walls' death, to the murder of Locheim and Chalmers, didn't count now. What did was that tonight he had seen the score against Hugh Allard written off; that was all that mattered.

Only now did he soberly weigh his reasons for leaving and his chances of remaining. Staying on, he told himself, would be a futile gesture even if it were possible. Holden and Kittering had needed him, and he had thrown in with them for private reasons. Tonight had seen the last of their troubles. There would be a new beginning for them, a settling into the placid grooves of a well-ordered life. There would be no place for him, an outlaw, no matter how willing Kittering and Holden might be to make that place for him.

As for Ann, she represented the embodiment of all he was riding away from. Under other circum-

stances, with a clean back trail and a solid future before him, he knew that to be able to see her occasionally, to be able even to speak a word with her now and then, would be his ultimate hope. But a past that was now crowding in on him nullified that hope and left nothing in its place.

Jim came out into the narrow yard behind the hotel, went through the gate in the picket fence and sauntered up along the backs of the stores. He passed the lean-to kitchen at the back of Mary Quinn's restaurant and was reminded of the girl's intent words as she spoke to Fats Holden before they had gone out onto the roofs. He knew that tonight marked the beginning of a new and unlooked-for chapter in Holden's life, one the thin man possibly wasn't yet quite aware of.

He came obliquely onto the street by crossing a vacant lot. Before he went over to its far side, he glanced down toward the hotel. A crowd had gathered on the walk by the hitch rails. Here, beyond the stores, the walks were deserted.

Coming up on the wood shed behind the jail, Jim saw a man's low shape standing near the horses. It was Spade Deshay.

"I'd about given you up," the outlaw called carefully. "Headed out?"

"I'll stop at Kittering's for my claybank," Jim answered.

"How'd it wind up across there?" asked Spade. "I wanted to go over and have a look, but that bunch swarmed in and I couldn't. Dawes said he'd be back, but he hasn't showed up yet."

"Kittering was hurt, not bad. Allard's dead."

"That about takes care of everything, don't it?" Spade murmured. He gave Jim a long, inspecting glance. "Are we travelin' together?"

Jim moved his head in a brief negative. "It wouldn't work, Spade. Besides, I'm going back and try to square things."

Spade smiled narrowly, his face strikingly young and handsome in this moment. "You sure believe in stickin' your neck out, don't you? Well—" He shrugged and stepped up into the saddle. "We had fun while it lasted, didn't we?"

"I'm sorry about Two Card, Spade."

The outlaw glanced toward the back of the shed. He said in a low voice: "He'd have wanted to cash in that way. He was gettin' old, a little tired. Maybe it's a good thing."

He reined out from Jim, said, "*Adios, amigo,*" and walked his horse away in the darkness.

Jim stood looking after him, a little irritated at the thought of the old enmity that had lain between them, the feeling that was now replaced by something he found close to genuine affection. But he didn't belong with Spade. In time, their wills, both strong, would clash again and they would go their separate ways. It was better to leave it like this, each respecting the other; to break it off clearly.

An impatience filled him as the sound of the outlaw's pony faded down the line of the tracks. Spade was heading south. Jim jerked his horse's reins free and swung up into leather. He didn't look over toward the street and the hotel as he left town, taking the trail north.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE END OF A GUN-BLURRED TRAIL

FATS HOLDEN left Doc Swain four doors short of the hotel, telling him he'd be along in a minute. He turned off the walk and

climbed the two steps to the door of Mary Quinn's restaurant and reached out to open it. It opened before his hand touched the knob. Mary stood there. She wore a light coat. She had dressed and was leaving.

When Fats stepped into the light, when she saw who it was, a startled, relieved look crossed the girl's face. Then, with a choked cry that was nearly a sob, she came impulsively into his arms.

"Don't ever leave me again!" she pleaded in a broken voice. "I thought . . . I thought you'd been killed!"

Within the tall man a new hope burst into life. He hadn't understood what she'd said before tonight; he understood even less what she was saying now.

He reached down and took her face in his hands, looking down into it. "Mary, I ought to tell you about Mule," he said haltingly, voicing, with direct honesty, the thing that had been preying on his mind the whole evening.

"You don't have to, Fats. I know. He was here tonight. He . . . he asked me to marry him. He told me he had a ranch near Santa Fe and offered to take me there with him. I wouldn't believe it. He was angry. Then he accused me of being in love with you." Her glance took on a new tenderness. "Fats, why haven't you ever told me?"

"Told you what?"

"How you feel about me."

"Would it have made a difference?"

"Yes," she murmured.

The tall man could hardly believe his hearing. He was half embarrassed, half eager, totally lost when it came to lovemaking. So he almost welcomed the interruption that came at that moment. A man turned in from the walk, saw them

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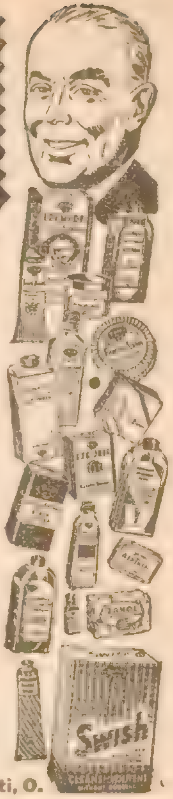

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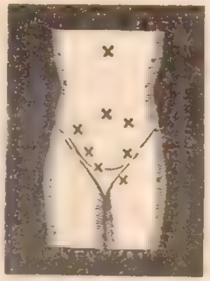

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and said: "How soon before I can get breakfast, Mary?"

"Right now, Harvey," the girl said, and gave Fats' hand a firm pressure, adding in a lower voice: "You'd better get down there and see about Kittering now. Come back soon."

Holden had the feeling that all the goodness in the world was coming to life with the dawn now snuffing out the brightness of the stars in the paling sky overhead. But suddenly he was once more worried about Kittering, and hurried his long stride on down to the hotel and up the veranda steps.

Sid Bailey had been stationed at the door to keep the crowd out. He moved aside to let Holden enter.

"How's Miles, Sid?" Fats asked anxiously.

"Not bad." The deputy nodded to the group in the far front corner of the lobby.

KITTERING was across there, lying on a plush settee, his shirt off and Doc Swain bending over him, applying a square bandage to his side with strips of sticking plaster. Kittering's bearded face was set in pain and a sultry anger, and he was looking across to where Trent Harms sat handcuffed in a rocker, the full glare of an unshaded lamp shining into his bruised and battered face.

One of Harms' eyes was swollen, blue and shut, the other puffed and red. A long gash down his left cheek bled a line of crimson to the tip of his chin. The look in his one open eye was sullen, hard.

Ann stood at the head of the couch where her father lay, her pale face tense and a little afraid. In front of Harms' chair stood Virgil Pierce, Fred Blythe and Tom Oldham, the lawyer. It was obvious that something had been said immediately before Holden had entered to bring the sober angry looks to the faces of these people, for Blythe stood star-

ing down at his prisoner now with a baleful light in his eyes.

As Holden crossed the room, Blythe turned to give him a quick look. Then the lawman wheeled on Harms again. "All right, tell us why you did it! Why did you kill Chalmers?"

"I didn't! Whoever said I did is lyin'!"

"Hugh told me it was you. He told me a lot of other things, too. Come clean now and it may save your neck!"

Harms sat there in a stubborn silence that dragged out for several moments. Finally the sheriff shrugged and turned to Virgil Pierce. "All right, you can have him, Pierce. But you can't have Jim Allard. I'm writing the governor in Santa Fe tomorrow. I'll tell him how things stand here. I'm going to get Jim Allard a full pardon."

Pierce said mildly: "Go ahead, I don't want him. But I do want this man. Harms isn't your real handle, is it?" he queried sharply, looking down at the Circle A man. "Across in Goldfield you were known as Ed Trent."

Harms' sullen look lifted to the ex-marshal. "Go on," he sneered. "Make it good!"

"Don't worry, I won't have to add anything to what's already known. That reward notice says you clubbed your partner to death with a stick of firewood, fought him for six ounces of gold dust. They still have a law across there. You'll hang!"

When Harms made no attempt to either deny the statement or defend himself, Pierce shrugged and nodded to Blythe. "Go ahead with this other."

"Hugh had been in to see Chalmers earlier that night, hadn't he, Trent?" the sheriff asked.

"Had he?" asked Harms indifferently.

"He offered Chalmers money to hold off on buying those options. Chalmers wouldn't take a bribe. So Hugh sent you back to take care of him. You crawled through the window to his room and shot him in the back. The next morning Mule Evans was sent in to plant that note in Jim Allard's shaving mug and steal the hotel register."

Harms' face had gone a sickly yellow, but he didn't speak. He sat hunched over to one side, for his fall down the stairway had cost him some broken ribs.

Blythe shrugged and turned away.

"What's this about options, Fred?" Holden said. "Did you get a wire from Denver?" He had already connected the sheriff's solution of Chalmers' death with the telegram Jim had sent yesterday from the way station below Sands. But he didn't yet know how the answer to that wire had explained Hugh Allard's actions.

Blythe nodded, smiling wryly. "I reckon your side kick outguessed me there. I didn't think to wire for the information he did. This whole thing was built up around Hugh trying to get control of land to sell the railroad for a new pass across the peaks. Kittering's layout was a big part of it."

HOLDEN whistled softly, seeing things he had only suspected before, things Jim had told him about.

"What else do you know?" he asked.

"Plenty. All there is. Hugh met Kurt Locheim on the trail that afternoon. He knew Kurt was due at the ranch to see him, so he went

out to meet him. Packed a shotgun on his saddle just in case."

"In case of what?"

"Just what happened. The judge told Hugh he was giving the decision against him. Hugh tried to argue him out of it. Kurt wouldn't budge and Hugh lost his head. He cut him down. Then to cover the murder, he wedged the judge's boot through the stirrup so the stallion would drag him." Blythe's face had taken on a grim look. He added: "Hugh had the gall to tell me all this tonight, on the way to Kittering's, before he slugged me and had me put out of the way—so he thought. Ann managed to get me out of that spot." The look he gave the girl was grateful.

Ann said in a brittle voice: "There was more, too, Fred. You told me Hugh mentioned Billy Walls and Bob Elder."

Blythe nodded. "I'd forgotten that. Walls, it seems, was riding fence that day. When he heard Hugh's shotgun cut loose, he rode over to see what was wrong. Hugh saw him and thought Walls had witnessed the killing. So he hurried back home and sent Elder and Harms out to get Walls. They caught up with him as he was headed over the peaks. It seems Walls had spooked and was leaving the country as fast as he could." The lawman remembered something then and looked at Holden more sharply. "Where's Jim Allard?"

It was Kittering who answered the question. "Gone."

"Gone where?" Holden asked sharply.

Kittering winced as Doc Swain applied the dressing to his wound. "He said he was headed out. I tried to make him stay, but he wouldn't."

Fats' look went to Ann. He saw her face lose its color and a hurt look come into her hazel eyes. He read his own meaning into that look, having seen her thoughts mirrored plainly on her face once before tonight, when they had helped Jim away from the blazing barn at Circle A.

"We can't let him run out on us like this!" Fats protested. "Hell, they've got a reward on him back there!" He was feeling much the same as Ann at this moment, hurt to think that Jim would leave this way, giving no one time even to thank him.

Tom Oldham, whose presence here hadn't yet been explained, spoke up abruptly: "You'll have to go after him, Fred. There's this matter of Allard's will."

"What about Hugh's will?" Blythe asked.

The lawyer cleared his throat in his accustomed way before making an important statement. "Hugh named Jim Allard as one of his heirs in a new will he had drawn up two weeks ago. I assume now that he had the papers drawn for a motive that was far from his real wish. But the fact remains, his new will is legal."

The startling announcement affected his listeners differently. Blythe's mouth dropped open in sheer amazement. Kittering appeared bewildered, Virgil Pierce puzzled. Holden, who wasn't as surprised as the rest, was watching Ann.

He saw a gladness break across her oval face and heard her breathe humbly: "Then he was telling the truth!" She felt Holden's glance on her and her eyes came around to meet his with an imploring look.

He went over to her and said, low enough so that only Miles Kittering heard him: "Jim wouldn't leave

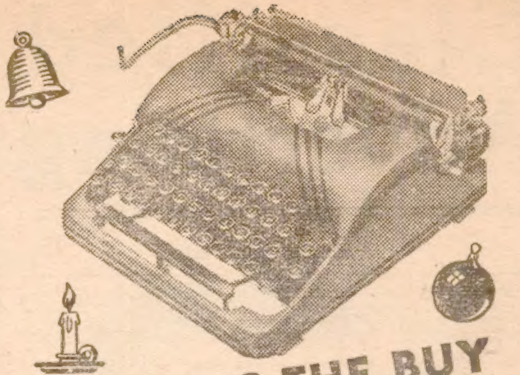
without his claybank. You could head him off if you get out there to Miles' place in a hurry."

BLOCK K lay in the shadow off the peaks as Jim Allard led the claybank, saddled, from the corral. The air was crisp, cold, and a heavy dew whitened the grass out across the upper meadow. Far out beyond the flats the sun's first full light was lifting the desert's purple haze from the flat horizon. It was one of those fresh, bracing mornings that bore a faint reminder of winter's slow approach.

The beauty of this new day was lost on Jim, for his mind was too crowded with memories of the dark hours just passed. He had tied his neckpiece around his shoulder after washing clean his wound at the well house. In two more weeks he wouldn't know that the shoulder had ever been torn by a bullet. Perhaps the scar would occasionally remind him of these brief full days in Sands and of what he had left behind him here, the unfulfilled promise of a better and an easier life, friends, a little happiness.

He climbed awkwardly into the saddle, favoring his bad arm. His glance traveled slowly over the layout, the cabin, the spot where Ed Beeson had died last night, the freshly mounded grave on the knoll, the burned haystack. Then he looked out across the pasture, trying to judge the best way of gaining the pass upward toward the peaks. And he saw the rider on the buckskin horse coming into the far end of the pasture.

He knew instantly who that rider was, and waited with a heavy feeling of dread. He had hoped that he could put Ann Allard from his mind. Now, to think that he must see her again, talk to her, deepened his bitterness.



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The buckskin was badly blown as Ann reined in in front of Jim. The girl's face was radiant, smiling. Jim lifted his hand to the brim of his Stetson, and the move brought his left shoulder into sight.

Ann's smile vanished. She said quickly: "Jim, you're hurt!"

"Nothin' I won't get over in a hurry," he answered.

Relief came into her eyes. She gave him a long smiling look then. "You're staying," she said. Her face took on a deeper color. She seemed strangely embarrassed at what she was having to say.

"Stayin'?" He shook his head. "No, it's not in the cards."

"It is, Jim! That will Hugh had written to show you is legal. You're half owner of Circle A."

He remembered that first visit he'd made Hugh Allard. He laughed softly, a little mockingly: "Hugh should be here to hear this!" Sober again, he added: "No, Ann. Circle A's yours. I wouldn't hold you to that kind of a bargain."

"But I'm asking to be held to it! I'm asking you to stay!"

What he saw in her eyes, the tenderness and warmth that was in them, made him drawl soberly: "You don't quite mean that."

"I do! Would I be here if I didn't?"

Jim reined the claybank across until his stirrup touched hers, a wild hope suddenly stirring in him.

"Ann. Look at me." He reached out and tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes.

Suddenly, because her eyes asked him to, he leaned over and kissed her on the lips. Her arms came out and held him, and Jim Allard knew with a deep thankfulness that his days of idle, meaningless roving were over.

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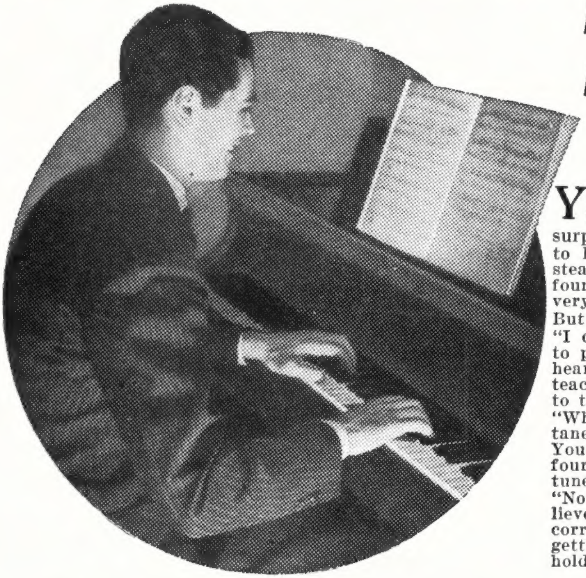

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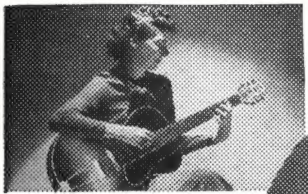

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